

# Bankrolling Repression? Modeling Third-Party Influence on Protests and Repression

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## Abstract

Ukraine's anti-government protests in 2013-2014, and the ensuing removal of President Yanukovich, raised much speculation about Russia's role in the outcome of the crisis, as well as more general questions related to third-party influence on domestic protests and repression. Does third-party assistance to the government increase the level of government repression or deter protesters? Does the leader removal indicate that foreign involvement was a failure? Or can a third party gain from involvement, even if its protégé leader is removed from power? We model external influence on the onset of protests and repression as a game between the government, the protesters, and a third party that supports the government. The main finding is that a third party may "bankroll" repression against the protesters, even at the risk of the removal of their protégé leader, with the goal of deterring future protests within its sphere of interest.

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## Introduction

The 2013-2014 anti-government protests in Maidan Nezalezhnosti in central Kyiv, Ukraine, and the ensuing removal of President Yanukovich, raised much speculation within the academic and policy communities. Despite media reports of Russian involvement, the Russian government never officially acknowledged providing assistance in repressing the protesters. The general opacity of the Russian government and their notoriously poor record-keeping suggest that the details of the interactions between Yanukovich and Russia may never become publicly available. As a result, even several years later, much of the international community and researchers are left with more questions than answers. What were possible incentives for Russia's involvement? What types of third parties may try to influence domestic crises of other states? What are the consequences of such influence? Does Yanukovich's removal indicate that Russia's involvement was a failure? Or did Russia gain from involvement, despite Yanukovich's removal?

There is ample evidence that similar third party attempts at influencing domestic crises are not rare. US and Soviet direct and indirect involvement in their respective spheres of interest throughout the Cold War, or Russia's interest in the outcomes of popular protests and revolutions in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, constitute only a few prominent examples. Regan and Meachum (2014) find evidence of some level of third party involvement in approximately one third of country-years identified as "at-risk" for experiencing armed conflict in the reasonable future between 1955-2003.<sup>1</sup> Third parties have also provided overt government support in approximately one-third of protest campaigns (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). In many of these cases, third party involvement was expressed in the form of consultation, economic and military aid, and weapons sales.<sup>2</sup> Some instances of third party involvement, however, happen in secrecy, behind closed doors. In countries with stricter records-keeping practices and greater government accountability, such as the US, some information is usually

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<sup>1</sup>Of these, third-party involvements by foreign governments make up 91% of the cases, while involvements supporting the government make up 31% of the total.

<sup>2</sup>Original data; see Appendix.

eventually revealed to the public (Forsythe 1992, 385). Other cases may never move beyond the realm of speculation. Despite the pervasiveness of third party involvement, this lack of systematic data presents a considerable challenge for empirical research. We overcome this challenge by using available information from the literature and news coverage to develop a game-theoretic model that allows for analyzing the interaction between the government, protesters, and an interested third party.

The resulting model is a generalization of the traditional two-player game between the government and the protesters through an introduction of a third player—an interested third party.<sup>3</sup> In our model, the onset of conflict between the government and the protesters is possible as part of a pure strategy equilibrium, in contrast to traditional two-player games that treat such conflict as either an off-equilibrium outcome or part of a mixed strategy equilibrium. The pure strategy explanation for protests and repression, provided by our model, is more intuitive than mixed-strategy equilibria, which occur under rather restrictive parameter conditions. These parameter restrictions are also somewhat incompatible with the empirical prevalence of government repression against protesters. A pure strategy explanation provided by our model, in contrast, holds for a much larger parameter space, which is more consistent with the commonality of protests and instances of state repression.

Our core finding is that third party involvement may result in repression of the protesters, and even the removal of the protégé leader in cases, which could have ended peacefully in the absence of a third party. The key to this finding is that, unlike much of the literature which attributes third parties with *neutral goals* (e.g., mediation, concern for human rights) or at least *neutral means* (e.g., avoid repression), we relax these assumptions and explore the resulting variation. Our model allows for neutral third parties, interested third parties that are averse to repression, *and* third parties that are explicitly interested in the use of repression. Building a reputation as a coercive third party, as in the latter case, may have some benefits, e.g., using repression to create a “scarecrow” for future protests. For

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<sup>3</sup>The two-player game is a special case of our model.

example, the images of repression at Maidan are frequently invoked as arguments against civil disobedience within Russia and its sphere of influence (Peterson 2015; Whitmore 2017). Other instances of “scarecrow” tactics include the 1956 Soviet-sponsored repression against workers protests in Poznań, Poland, and student demonstrations in Budapest, Hungary, as well as the massacres of the Eritrean-led opposition by the Soviet-supported Mengistu regime in Ethiopia.

Relaxing the assumption that the third party is motivated by a specific set of goals allows us to derive a set of very general predictions, some counter-intuitive insights, as well as explain a variety of third-party involvement/non-involvement scenarios, such as pressure from a “neutral” third party to avoid repression, an interested third party’s decision to stay out due to anticipated costs, or a repressive third party’s decision to bankroll repression for the sake of deterring future protesters. The latter scenario, in particular, has received little scholarly attention, despite its rather common occurrence, especially within the Russian sphere of interest. We use Chenoweth and Stephan’s (2011) data on protest campaigns, as well as some original data, to evaluate some of the predictions.

### **Domestic Politics and Third Party Involvement**

Repression research has focused on domestic political institutions. Proponents of the domestic democratic peace argue that democratic governments are less likely to repress protesters than authoritarian regimes (Davenport 2007; Poe and Tate 1994; Richards, Webb, and Clay 2015), although repression by democracies, especially in response to violent dissent, is also not uncommon (Conrad and Moore 2010; Davenport and Armstrong 2004; Davenport, Armstrong, and Moore 2008; Hill and Jones 2014; Ritter 2014; Ritter and Conrad 2016). Others have suggested the murder-in-the-middle hypothesis, which points to semi-democracies or semi-autocracies as the most likely hot spots for observing violent repression of protests (Pierskalla 2010; Regan and Bell 2010).

This literature rarely focuses on the international determinants of domestic repression

(although, see Gartner and Regan 1996; Moore 1995). Leaders of political regimes, however, rarely act independent from influences of outside third parties. Minor powers often rely for support on regional or great powers (Lake 2009; Nieman 2016); in other cases, third parties claim (explicitly or implicitly) regional “spheres of influence,” acting as de facto arbitrators within those areas (Lemke 2002). Lake (2009), for example, argues many governments make a conscious strategic choice to enter an informal (hierarchical) relationship with a (usually like-minded) major/regional power, essentially as a form of an “insurance” arrangement: a smaller power supports the major power’s international policy agenda, while the major power enhances the smaller power’s economic or military security (Martinez Machain and Morgan 2013). The degree of smaller power’s dependence on this relationship may range from a military alliance or an economic partnership to a full-on puppet regime that has no power beyond that given to it by the major power. While such language invokes images of the US, USSR/Russia, or China (and their traditional spheres of interest), one can also think of less obvious examples, such as Saudi Arabia’s or Iran’s roles in Yemen and Syria. Such informal arrangements between domestic governments and international third parties may have important effects on domestic policy outcomes of the protégé state.

The role of international third parties in domestic crises is better understood within the related civil war literature (Aydin 2012; Bapat 2006; Gent 2008; Findley and Teo 2006). Involvement of a third party with an independent stake in the issue may affect conflict duration (Aydin and Regan 2012; Cunningham 2010). The probability of conflict, for instance, may decrease as a result of involvement by third parties with strong ties to one of the conflict participants (Regan 2002). Conflict outcome may also depend on whether the third party supports the government, the challenging group, or has a separate interest in the issue (Kydd 2006; Regan 2002).

This paper extends the literature in two ways. First, we extend research on third party involvement in civil wars to explore the effects of observed and unobserved third party influences on the onset of protests and the government’s decision to use repression. Second,

unlike much of prior literature, our model relaxes the (implicit) assumption of the legitimacy or neutrality of third party's goals and means. Rather than assuming any specific goals and means, third party's broader involvement incentives are modeled via an unrestricted parameter ( $\beta$ ), which may represent a variety of goals and considerations, such as ending conflict (Carment and Rowlands 1998; Regan 1998), preventing human rights violations (Gartner and Regan 1996), pursuit of economic and geo-strategic goals (Findley and Teo 2006), or even the goal of repression for its own sake. These broader third party goals are referred to as "milieu" goals (Wolfers 1984), and are distinct from the policy goals that are immediately at stake in any given domestic crisis. Milieu goals may include establishing a certain reputation or a sphere of influence, promoting international law or particular economic models, etc. Milieu goals are, of course, not equivalent to normatively positive goals and depend on the outlook/aims of the leadership of the third party: thus, milieu goals of a repressive regime may include supporting/legitimizing undemocratic governments in other states. Russian President Putin's support for Assad in Syria, for example, may partially stem from his own domestic insecurities (Hill 2013).

In addition to the nature of their milieu goals, third parties also differ in their legitimacy of means, i.e. whether they consider coercion as an acceptable means for the pursuit of their milieu goals. Whereas some third parties view coercion as an acceptable if undesirable means, others may find it completely unacceptable (e.g, Gorbachev famously refused to support coercion against protests in East Germany in 1989, whereas his predecessors assisted in suppressing protests in Hungary and Poland in 1956.) We refer to third party's acceptance of coercion as a means of achieving its milieu goals using the terms "marginal" (coercion is an acceptable means) vs. "legitimate" (coercion is *not* an acceptable means) third party. An obvious complication is that the content of milieu goals is not always independent of the means that the third party may view as acceptable. A reputation as a coercive third party may have its benefits: brutality and massacres have been long used as effective tools for deterring future challenges in authoritarian regimes. And vice versa: a third party may

derive an additional benefit from pursuing its goals through non-coercive means.

Third party pursue their policy and milieu goals within their spheres of interest using “the power of the purse”: they may attempt to “sweeten” the government’s policy concessions with grants or favorable-term loans, military equipment, expertise, or even personnel to back those policies (Licht 2010; Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2007). Consider, for example, the agreement between Ukraine’s Yanukovich and Russia, in which Russia agreed to lower natural gas prices as well as purchase 15 billion in Ukrainian-issued bonds. Notably, the signing of this agreement coincided with Yanukovich’s announcement to withdraw from negotiations of Ukraine’s association status with the EU (Interfax-Ukraine 2013). Similar patterns are observed in Russia’s efforts to legitimize the long-time rule of Belarus’ Lukashenka through regular diplomatic missions, generous foreign aid, oil subsidies, and debt forgiveness (Ambrosio 2006).

## Theoretical Model of Protests and Repression

Our game focuses on the interaction between three actors: *Government (G)*, *Protesters (P)*, and a *Third Party (T)*. The government is the ruling leader(s) that has the executive decision-making power in the state. The protesters are made up of activists within the society. Finally, the third party is a foreign entity, such as a major/regional power (e.g., France in West Africa) or a neighboring state.<sup>4</sup> The third-party and government have the same preference ordering regarding the policy outcome, disputed by the protesters.<sup>5</sup>

We assume that the government and third party are in a quid-pro-quo relationship, such that the government trades some of its policy autonomy in exchange for the third party’s resources, security guarantees, or other benefits. In the extreme, such a policy dependency between the governments of asymmetrically empowered states results in a “puppet” regime in the weaker state. A more general example of such a relationship, however, is that in which

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<sup>4</sup>Most minor powers will have no ability to project power beyond their immediate region or interest in getting involved in domestic crises of other states.

<sup>5</sup>Exploring the effects of third parties aligned with protesters is a topic for future research.

the state leader fulfills the role of a protégé of third party, i.e. has significant autonomy over her country's domestic policies, yet consults/defers to the third party on particular issues. Many developing states defer to the US on economic policies. Similarly, many post-Soviet states, such as Belarus or Kazakhstan, while exercising relative autonomy on their domestic policies, tend to consult Russia on foreign policy.

We further assume that, while the third party and the ruling government are in agreement regarding the policy outcome on the particular issue disputed by the protesters, the broader interests of the third party and the government are not in perfect alignment (Lake 2009; Nieman 2016). Specifically, we assume that while, all else equal, the third party prefers that its protégé-leader remain in power (i.e., is not overthrown by the protesters), this preference may be outweighed by third party's milieu goals. Throughout the 20th century, for example, the US had to balance its relationships with a number of corrupt governments in Latin America and the Middle East (e.g., the Somozas of Nicaragua, Mubarak of Egypt) with its broader goals (e.g., international law, liberal economic policies).

The status quo distribution of benefits in the society privileges the government and its supporters and disadvantages the group represented by the protesters. These societal cleavages may be based on specific policy disagreements, as well as other factors (e.g., ethnicity, religion, access to resources). For the sake of parsimony, we abstract away from the precise source of these disagreements and simply assume that the protesters and government disagree over policy  $x$ . The disputed policy outcome is modeled as an indivisible zero-sum good of value normalized between 0 and 1, so that the party that obtains its preferred policy obtains the benefit of 1, while the party that does not obtain its preferred policy outcome gets the payoff of 0.<sup>6</sup> The third party is assumed to possess the resources to influence the resolution of the disagreement.

The scope of protesters' demands is thus narrowed to issues that concern broad swathes

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<sup>6</sup>The Appendix discusses the consequences of relaxing this assumption. As an extension, protesters' demands may also be modeled as a function of their capacity, in line with recent work by Thomas, Reed, and Wolford (2016).

of the population and/or multiple societal layers—hence the interest/involvement of a third party. Such demands may require major institutional reform (e.g., empowering a disenfranchised group), administrative change (e.g., autonomy), or a major policy orientation (e.g., 1975 Lebanese Civil War started as a movement against the pro-Syrian policy orientation of the government).<sup>7</sup>

The game starts with *Nature*,  $N$ , determining the type of protesters, who are *Strong* with probability  $\alpha$  and *Weak* with probability  $1 - \alpha$ . The protesters’ type is conceptualized as *strong* or *weak* relative to the government. If repressed, *Strong* protesters ( $SP$ ) will overthrow the government, while *Weak* protesters ( $WP$ ) will be defeated. Protesters know their own type, but the government and third party have to form a set of beliefs about the type of protesters they are facing. After  $N$  moves, the protesters have to decide whether to challenge ( $C$ ) the government or not ( $\neg C$ ).

If the protesters do not challenge, the game ends with the *Status Quo* outcome. In this outcome, the government receives a payoff of 1, associated with implementing its preferred policy; the protesters receive a payoff of 0, as they do not get their preferred outcome; and the third party, whose preferred policy outcome aligns with that of the government, obtains the payoff of 1.

If the protesters decide to challenge and take to the streets, this sends a signal regarding their type to the third party, and the third party responds by choosing a level of assistance  $k \geq 0$  that it is willing to give the government to help repress the protesters and compensate it for a possible loss of office. The game ends with the government’s choice of whether to repress the protesters ( $R$ ) or not ( $\neg R$ ). Assume  $r > 0$  is the cost of repressing the protests, which may include paying the internal police, buying the necessary weapons, etc. Then the total government expense on repressing equals  $r - k$ , as the third party pays the cost  $k$ .

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<sup>7</sup>The equilibrium analysis presented below reveals that, depending on the actions of the government and the third party, these types of demands may lead to an empirical observation of no protests (*Deterrence* equilibrium), as well as small-scale protest events, or even “a series of continuous” and “purposive” protests, i.e. a *protest campaign* (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011, 14). For instance, the model makes no clear predictions of protest size for the *Accommodation* equilibrium, i.e. the government may accommodate pre-emptively, after observing a single protest event, or as a result of a protest campaign.

Third-party assistance enhances the government's ability to repress (e.g., superior weapons, better training, and counter-protest strategies).

The government's use of repression against *Weak* protesters results in the *Successful Repression* outcome. Third-party assistance increases the level of repression against the protesters by  $k$  (e.g, through availability of superior weapons or adding to the size of the internal police). The protesters fail to obtain their preferred policy and pay the cost of repression, which yields them a payoff of  $-r - k$ .<sup>8</sup> The third party obtains its preferred outcome minus the assistance amount  $k$ . Should the third party get involved in a domestic crisis in its protégé state, its payoff also includes the milieu goals parameter  $\beta$ .<sup>9</sup> The direction (positive/negative) of  $\beta$  depends on third party's legitimacy of means: a marginal third party that views coercion as an acceptable tool has a negative  $\beta$ -parameter ( $\beta < 0$ ), while a legitimate third party, that decries coercion, has a positive  $\beta$ -parameter ( $\beta > 0$ ). The absolute value (size) of  $\beta$ , however, depends on both the importance/benefits of getting involved in a particular case in pursuit of milieu goals minus the expected costs, such as risk of economic sanctions or conflict with other third parties. As a result, the absolute value, and to a lesser extent, the sign of  $\beta$  may vary on a case-by-case basis, as the same third-party may have different milieu-related incentives to intervene in different cases. For example, due to shared history, language, and ethnic origin, Russia may have different values of  $\beta$  for intervening in Ukraine than for intervening in Kyrgyzstan. Although likely negative in both cases (as Russia has long demonstrated its acceptance of coercive means), Russia's  $\beta$  may be larger in absolute value in the case of Ukraine than in the case of Kyrgyzstan. Analogously, Britain, France, and the US may have all had negative  $\beta$  during the height of the Cold War (as evidenced by their general acceptance of coercive means to fight communism), but the size

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<sup>8</sup>A more precise way to model the effect of  $k$  would be to allow the government to spend a proportion of  $k$  on additional repression and the leftover amount as compensation for loss of office, i.e. *Strong* protesters' payoff would equal  $1 - r - \theta k$ . We formally explored the effects of such a complication and concluded they are not consequential for the predictions of interest.

<sup>9</sup>As a simplification, we equate the third party's preference that its protégé remain in power with its preference for a particular policy outcome, i.e. third party's benefit from preserving its protégé is part of the policy benefit that equals to 1.

of their  $\beta$  may have varied from case to case, depending on geo-strategic importance, risk of Soviet involvement, economic and cultural ties to the location, etc. (Carment and Rowlands 1998).

Finally, if a third party is uninterested/indifferent towards an outcome of the case, then its  $\beta$ -parameter is 0. This would happen, for example, if a state is unimportant to the pursuit of the third party's milieu goals (a state without geo-strategic or economic importance) or the benefits of getting involved do not outweigh the costs (e.g., Russia's benefits from intervening in a NATO member, like the Baltic states, may not be worth the possible costs of conflict with its NATO allies). In either of these scenarios,  $\beta = 0$ , which means that the third party would have nothing to gain, on balance, from helping the government repress the protesters.<sup>10</sup>

As a result, the use of repression against *Weak* protesters leads to a payoff of  $1 - k - \beta \mathbb{I}[k > 0]$  to the third party. Since third party's ability to promote its milieu goals is conditional on its involvement in the crisis, the parameter  $\beta$  is multiplied by an indicator variable  $\mathbb{I}$ , which takes on the value of 1 when  $k > 0$ , and 0 otherwise. If the third party does not get involved ( $k = 0$ ), then it derives no cost or benefit related to its milieu goals. Finally, the government obtains its preferred outcome minus the costs of repression plus the third party assistance, for the payoff of  $1 - r + k$ .

The use of repression against *Strong* protesters results in the *Removal from Office* outcome. In this case, the protesters obtain their preferred policy outcome minus the cost of repression  $1 - r - k$ .<sup>11</sup> The third party's payoff from this outcome equals to  $-k - \beta \mathbb{I}[k > 0]$ . As earlier,  $\beta$  is multiplied by an indicator variable  $\mathbb{I}[k > 0]$ , so that the third party's reputation is only affected, should it provide non-zero assistance  $k$ . Finally, the government pays the cost of repression,  $r$ , as well as that of removal from office,  $y$  ( $y > 0$ ), obtaining the

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<sup>10</sup>Note that, within our game, an indifferent third party is not equivalent to a *neutral* third-party. As long as a neutral third-party has an interest in helping resolve the conflict, it must have a non-zero value of  $\beta$ .

<sup>11</sup>Granting of the particular policy demand is likely be a pre-condition for the next leader. Protesters, however, gain no additional utility from regime change, i.e. our model is agnostic on whether the new leader will be more or less favorable to other protesters' grievances beyond the policy that led to the regime change.

payoff of  $-y - r + k$ .

If the government does not repress ( $\neg R$ ) (whether against *Weak* or *Strong* protesters), the game ends in the *Accommodation* outcome. In this case, the protesters obtain their preferred policy outcome for a payoff of 1, while both the third party and the government obtain the payoffs of 0. If the government chooses  $\neg R$ , then the third party's assistance  $k$  is not disbursed (i.e. the third party keeps it). The government, in other words, cannot choose to accept  $k$  and forgo repression. For example, when, during the Orange revolution, Ukraine overturned the results of the fraudulent 2004 election and installed a pro-Western leader, Russia responded by removing Ukraine's natural gas subsidies (Nygren 2008).<sup>12</sup> The structure and payoffs of the game are presented in Figure 1. To help keep track of notation, Table 1 provides a summary of all the parameters and their constraints.

[Figure 1, and Table 1]

## Equilibria

The full solution to the game is presented in Appendix. The game has three pure strategy equilibria: *Leader Removal*, *Deterrence*, and *Accommodation*.

*Removal Equilibrium* is summarized as:

$$\begin{cases} S_G = R, b = 1; S_T = k^* = y + r, a = 1; S_{SP} = C; S_{WP} = \neg C; \\ 1 - 2r - y > 0, \quad r + y < -\beta \end{cases}$$

with payoffs:

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<sup>12</sup>As an extension to the model, one could modify this assumption and allow  $k$  to include other types of assistance, e.g., aid intended for building democratic institutions.

$$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} U_{SP}(EQ1) = 1 - 2r - y \\ U_{WP}(EQ1) = 0 \\ U_{G|SP}(EQ1) = 0 \\ U_{G|WP}(EQ1) = 1 \\ U_{TP|SP}(EQ1) = -y - r - \beta \\ U_{TP|WP}(EQ1) = 1, \end{array} \right.$$

where  $a$  and  $b$  denote government and third party's beliefs that the protesters are of the *Strong* type.

In this equilibrium, we observe the onset of protests only when protesters are of the *Strong* type (*Weak* protesters are deterred); the government uses repression, irrespective of the protesters' type; and the third party provides the government with an assistance  $k^* = y + r$  to help offset the expenses associated with repression and/or the cost of losing office.

This equilibrium only exists in the presence of a marginal third party  $\beta < 0$ , and does not exist in the two-player version of the game (see Appendix for Lemma 2). The dynamics of the game that correspond to this equilibrium, therefore, constitute the core of the paper's contribution and help understand the previously unexplored effects of involvement by a third party. In less technical terms, the *Removal* equilibrium occurs when the third party is of the marginal type: it stands a lot to gain from involvement ( $\beta$  is large in absolute value) and is not averse to bankrolling repression in pursuit of its goals ( $\beta$  is negative). An additional condition is that the costs of repression,  $r$ , and leader removal,  $y$ , are low to moderate. Third parties that derive a benefit from building a reputation as coercive powers that are not to be challenged, such as the USSR/Russia, fit these requirements especially well.<sup>13</sup> When these conditions are met, a marginal third party would provide sufficient resources to repress the

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<sup>13</sup>In contrast, if the third party viewed the use of repression as a (unavoidable) cost, the absolute value for  $\beta$  will be smaller, which would make such a third party less likely to meet the condition.

protesters.

In the game, protesters can anticipate this outcome, and hence, only *Strong* protesters—those that are prepared to fight—challenge the government. The use of major repression against *Strong* protesters is, of course, risky from the perspective of the leader. For example, while the initial protester demands in Maidan related to the country’s pro-EU orientation, the first use of repression resulted in cries for Yanukovich’s resignation and prosecution. Live images of government brutality against the protesters in Maidan attracted international attention, which further increased the stakes for the Yanukovich regime. Importantly, within the game, these increasing stakes for the leader are recognized by both the leader and the third party: the third party chooses to bankroll repression *despite* the increasing risk of the removal of their protégé leader. In this equilibrium, brutal repression, which helps accomplish its milieu goals, is more important for the third party than the policy at stake and keeping their protégé in power. The protégé leader also recognizes the risks, but since her tenure in office *and* post-tenure fate depend on third party’s continued support, she uses repression if such is the preference of the third party, even despite the risks.

This logic is supported by empirical evidence. Using Chenoweth and Stephan’s (2011) data on protest campaigns between 1899-2006, Table 2 provides a cross-tabulation of government use of major repression, based on whether it received overt third-party support.<sup>14</sup> It shows that third-party involvement substantially increases the probability of major repression—a 7 percentage-point difference. And these results are likely to be conservative, due to a lack of data on *covert* third party support.

For further empirical evaluation, we expanded the subset of cases of major repression in the presence of overt third party support (cases in the bottom right cell of Table 2) from Chenoweth and Stephan’s (2011) data to include several additional variables, such as

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<sup>14</sup>A protest campaign—defined as “as a series of observable, continuous, purposive mass tactics or events in pursuit of a political objective” (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011, 14)—is a distinct type of a protest event from a small-scale riot or a localized protest. Data on protest campaigns is appropriate for analyzing the *Removal* equilibrium, as this equilibrium predicts that the protests are sufficiently continuous and purposive to pose a threat to the leader’s security in office.

whether the protests resulted in the removal of the leader, the post-tenure fate of such leaders, and the country name of the third party.<sup>15</sup> First, we find that, in the presence of third party support, engaging in major repression results in a rather high rate of leader removal from office (approximately 70% of the cases).<sup>16</sup> Next, Table 3 summarizes the post-tenure fate of protégé leaders who were removed as a direct result of using repression against protesters. Consistent with the model, the third party seems to compensate their protégés for a loss of office: a large majority of such leaders—76%—enjoys a safe retirement in their own country, the third-party state, or another friendly state.<sup>17</sup>

[Table 2, Table 3, and Table 4 here]

Of course, this equilibrium only occurs for marginal third-parties (Lemma 2), so a more accurate evaluation of empirical evidence would account for third-party type. As preliminary evidence, Table 4 breaks up the cases based on the (primary) sponsoring third party and temporal period. Although it is admittedly difficult to devise an accurate measure of third-party type  $\beta$ , the temporal period may serve as a proxy for an increase in  $\beta$  for the US and Britain, due to their increased post-1990 emphasis on human rights. Consistent with the model expectations, we see a substantial decrease in the number of repressive leaders sponsored by the US in the post-1990 time period, while the corresponding number for Russia is still high: there are 7 cases in which repressive leaders, sponsored by Russia, found a safe retirement in the post-1990 years, in contrast to only 2 cases for the US. In the pre-1990 period, both superpowers tended to engage in much more sponsorship of repression in third-party states, guaranteeing a safe retirement to 11 (USSR) and 12 (US) leaders.

*Deterrence Equilibrium* is summarized as:

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<sup>15</sup>See Data section of Appendix for data and coding rules.

<sup>16</sup>We may speculate that, in the rest of the cases, the leader is able to remain in power, despite the use of repression, by using third party’s resources to pay off supporters. Moving from a deterministic theoretical model to a probabilistic empirical one, we may think of  $y$  as a function of the probability of removal  $q$  and a cost of removal  $\zeta$ , (i.e.,  $y = q\zeta$ ). Third party’s assistance that compensates the leader for possible loss of power  $y$  then may represent resources that leader may use to remain in power and/or spent to ensure his/her post-tenure safety.

<sup>17</sup>Unfortunately, data on leaders removed (regularly or irregularly) as a result of using repression in the absence of a third party are not currently available for comparison.

$$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} S_G = R, b = \alpha ; S_T = k^* = y + r, a = \alpha ; S_{SP} = \neg C; S_{WP} = \neg C \\ 1 - 2r - y < 0, \quad r + y < -\beta \end{array} \right.$$

with payoffs:

$$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} U_{SP}(EQ2) = 0 \\ U_{WP}(EQ2) = 0 \\ U_G(EQ2) = 1 \\ U_T(EQ2) = 1 \end{array} \right.$$

This equilibrium can only occur under conditions that are characteristic of repressive regimes that are sponsored by a marginal third party. Neither protests nor repression constitute part of this expected equilibrium outcome, i.e. the government is able to deter any protests (weak or strong) (e.g., Ritter and Conrad 2016). It is of interest that, were the protests to occur, the cost of repressing them is fully covered by the third party assistance  $k^*$ , which compensates the government's expenses, associated with repression, as well as the costs of removal from office, if necessary. The third party's guarantee of economic help, in other words, is what enables the government to effectively deter the protesters.

*Accommodation Equilibrium* is summarized as:

$$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} S_G = \neg R, b = \alpha; S_T = k^* = 0, a = \alpha; S_{SP} = C; S_{WP} = C; \\ \alpha > \frac{1-r}{1+y}, \quad r + y > -\beta \end{array} \right.$$

with payoffs:

$$\begin{cases} U_{SP}(EQ3) = 1 \\ U_{WP}(EQ3) = 1 \\ U_G(EQ3) = 0 \\ U_{TP}(EQ3) = 0 \end{cases}$$

In this equilibrium, referred to as the *Accommodation Equilibrium*, the government allows protests and, rather than repressing, tends to find a sustainable accommodation outcome.<sup>18</sup> It is noteworthy that rather than reflecting of the government’s tolerance, attributed to liberal democratic regimes, this equilibrium is merely a function of third party’s decision against “bankrolling” repression. The government’s use of repression, or lack thereof, in other words, is solely determined by the third party. In this case, the third party does not provide  $k$ , because it has a high prior belief that the protesters are strong enough to overthrow the government. As long as repression is costly ( $r > 0$ ), the government will never repress any protesters without the help of a third party.

Taken together, the three pure strategies equilibria help explain the known empirical regularity that protest campaigns are overwhelmingly successful. The overall success rate of protest campaigns is 54%, which *increases* to 60%, when the government receives overt support from a third party (a summary of Chenoweth and Stephan’s (2011) data).<sup>19</sup> The intuition is that potentially unsuccessful cases of *Weak* protesters are deterred from challenging the government in both of the equilibria, in which the government uses repression (*Removal* and *Deterrence*). *Weak* protesters, therefore, only challenge the government as part of the *Accommodation* equilibrium, which results in government concessions. Protest failures, in other words, are less likely to be observed and recorded in the data than protest successes.

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<sup>18</sup> *Accommodation* equilibrium, however, does not rule out leader removal, i.e. leader removal may itself be the demand of the protesters.

<sup>19</sup> Successful cases are defined as those that resulted in at least partial concessions.

## Implications

The game clarifies the causal mechanisms behind the observed outcomes of repression, removal, and accommodation, as well as the frequently unobservable outcome of deterrence. In what follows, we zero in on two types of insights: those that link the outcome with the type of third party, and those that explore the effects of domestic institutional variation.

### Third Party Type

We now turn to  $T$ 's decision regarding the amount  $k$  that it allocates to  $G$ . Since  $T$  is an uninformed actor, selecting which type of equilibrium will occur in the game boils down to the exogenous parameter values in  $T$ 's expected utilities. There exist ranges of  $\beta$  that allow for each of the pure strategy equilibria, or preclude the existence of certain equilibria. The first insight is that a negative  $\beta$  is a necessary but not sufficient condition for either the *Removal* or the *Deterrence* equilibria: third party's acceptance of coercive means does not, by itself, guarantee that it is willing to bankroll repression in any particular case.

To illustrate this, Figure 2 displays the parameter spaces for each equilibrium as a function of the cost of repression,  $r$ , on the horizontal axis, and third party type and interest,  $\beta$ , on the vertical axis, while holding the cost of leader removal at a moderate value ( $y = 0.5$ ). Figure 2 shows that the game provides unequivocal *pure strategy* predictions regarding the outcome of the interaction between the three players, for any set of parameter values. The parameter space that allows for *Accommodation* exists under all, even very negative values of  $\beta$ , although its area increases/decreases with changes in  $\beta$ . If we think of the costs of repression as proportional to the spontaneity and size of the protests, this insight may explain why even coercive third parties are known to back down when faced with spontaneous massive protests (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). For example, the US promptly withdrew its support for Marcos' regime in Philippines, faced with the overwhelming size of the protests in 1986. The value of US's  $\beta$ , although negative (as they continued to prop Marcos despite instances of previous repression), was not large enough in absolute size to justify the enor-

mous costs of repressing a massive protest. Instead, the US stayed out of the conflict and the protesters obtained their demand of Marcos' resignation. In contrast, had the protest been less spontaneous, Marcos might have been able to use US aid to prevent its occurrence in the first place.

[Figure 2 here]

A similar logic may also explain why Russia did not assist with repression during the Orange Revolution in 2004, but did during the Maidan protests in 2013-2014. Although Ukraine has consistently been at the center of Russia's milieu goals (large absolute value of  $\beta$ ), and Russia is generally accepting of coercion in its domestic and foreign policies ( $\beta < 0$ ), the Orange Revolution, which was the first large-scale and spontaneous protest campaign in post-Soviet Ukraine, took Russia by surprise (Beissinger 2013). Having learned from the experience of the Orange Revolution, Russia was more prepared for a popular protest, when its long-term protégé, Yanukovich, backed out of signing the EU Association treaty, at Russia's insistence. Maidan protests, in other words, may have been as large in size, but were less unexpected by the Russian government: since the cost of repression on longer notice is lower than that on shorter notice, the resulting equilibrium outcome shifted from *Accommodation* in 2004 to *Removal* in 2014.

A second insight is that the threshold value of  $\beta$  that rules out the two coercive equilibria (*Deterrence* and *Removal*) actually falls *below* zero. This insight challenges the basic intuition that marginal third parties ( $\beta < 0$ ) will always bankroll repression. This finding also provides an intuition of what type of third parties may act as *neutral*; why even marginal third parties may act neutral in some cases; and why the same third party may act as neutral in some, but not all cases. In particular, as long as  $\beta$  exceeds a certain negative threshold  $\beta^*$ , third party's milieu benefits do not outweigh its costs of bankrolling repression, in which case it prefers to act as an indifferent bystander (do nothing), or even a neutral mediator (e.g., provide non-coercive assistance).

One implication, in particular, is that third-party's decision to stay out of a domestic

crisis is not necessarily indicative of its lack of interest ( $\beta = 0$ ) or unacceptability of coercive means ( $\beta > 0$ ). If we were to draw a horizontal line at  $\beta = 0$ , the area below that line and above the diagonal line  $\beta^*$  corresponds to the parameter space, in which a marginal third party with an interest in the interaction ( $\beta < 0$ ) will act indistinguishable from a neutral or a legitimate third party, i.e. will provide no assistance with repression. This happens when the cost of bankrolling repression does not outweigh the milieu benefits: e.g., Egypt was forced to withdraw its aid to Yemen’s al-Sallal regime after its devastating losses in the Six Day War, which moved the outcome from a possible *Removal* equilibrium to a *Accommodation* equilibrium, in which al-Sallal was removed in a “bloodless coup” (Bidwell 1994). Another example is the US decision to withdraw support from their long-term protégé, the Somozas of Nicaragua: although not fully averse to repression, the US did not view a repressive outcome as a milieu benefit in itself (negative, but small absolute value of  $\beta$ ), and hence, gave up Somoza as his regime’s brutality started attracting international and domestic attention. US’ withdrawal of support for Mubarak in response to 2011 mass protests serves as an example of a legitimate third party with an important and not selfless stake in an interaction acting indistinguishable from a neutral third party. This insight fits nicely within the existing research on mediation that argues that “neutral” third parties frequently have ulterior motives (Findley and Teo 2006).

## **Institutional Features and Repression**

The theoretical model also speaks to institutional explanations for protest–repression interactions. In particular, our model sheds light on the effect of two important institutional features—the cost of repression  $r$  and the cost of a removal from office  $y$ . Both of these parameters are known to affect the probability of protests and repression. The costs of repression are generally higher in more transparent regimes; Bell, Clay, and Murdie (2012), for example, find that the presence of human rights organizations may decrease repression by increasing the government’s cost through publicizing the abuses. Conrad (2014), similarly,

shows that a leader’s cost of repression increases in the presence of independent judiciaries. As described above, the costs of repression may also depend on the size of and spontaneity of the protests.

The second institutional feature—leader’s cost/punishment as a result of a removal—has been previously linked to a leader’s level of institutional constraints. Leaders of less institutionally constrained regimes, such as personalist autocrats, face higher costs of removal than more constrained leaders. For example, while removal from office is rarely accompanied by additional punishments in democracies, deposed leaders of nondemocratic regimes frequently face additional penalties, such as exile, imprisonment, or even execution (Debs and Goemans 2010).

The model helps understand the interplay between these two parameters and the outcome of the protests. To highlight this aspect of the model, Figure 3 provides a visualization. The  $x$ -axis displays a range of possible repression costs  $r$ , and the  $y$ -axis displays a range of costs of removal from office  $y$ , while  $\beta$  is constrained to the range associated with a marginal third party,<sup>20</sup> and the probability that the protesters are strong,  $\alpha$ , increases as we move from left to right between subfigures.

[Figure 3 here]

First, the figure highlights that, as long as the costs of repression are high, otherwise repressive regimes may *appear* non-repressive and accommodate rather than repress protesters. The *Accommodation* equilibrium exists for any value of the cost of removal from office. If we think of the costs of removal from office as a proxy of whether a regime is democratic, this prediction would suggest that both authoritarian and democratic regimes may accommodate protesters if the cost of repression is sufficiently high (e.g., the protests are large and spontaneous).

Next, the figure shows the combination of parameters for the *Deterrence* equilibrium, in which the presence of a marginal third party helps deter protests against the regime through

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<sup>20</sup>We focus on the marginal third party equilibria, as legitimate third parties never bankroll repression.

the threat of repression. Holding third party's preference for repression constant, we see that whether the parameter space is conducive to the *Accommodation* or the *Deterrence* equilibrium largely depends on the belief that the protesters are strong,  $\alpha$ : as this belief increases (move from the left subfigure to the right subfigure), so does the area associated with the equilibrium in which the protesters obtain the concessions, *despite* the governments' relationship with a marginal third party. When the belief that protesters are strong is moderate or high (e.g.,  $\alpha = 0.6$  in the right subfigure), both authoritarian and democratic regimes accommodate the protesters' demands.<sup>21</sup> When the belief that protesters are strong is low (e.g.,  $\alpha = 0.2$  in the left subfigure), a regime may act in a repressive manner (i.e. deter protests through the threat of repression).

Third, the model speaks to the literature on individual leader outcomes (Goemans 2008; Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009). As the separating equilibrium is the only equilibrium, in which protests, repression, and leader removal are part of the actors' strategies, our model helps identify the parameter space that increases the risk of a leader's removal. According to the logic of the model, the separating equilibrium is observed when (1) strong protesters have a positive expected utility, even after accounting for the costs of repression,  $1 - 2r - y > 0$ , (2) when the third party is of the marginal type,  $\beta < -r - y$ , and (3) when the third-party and the government expect challenges only from the strong protesters,  $a = b = 1$ . As highlighted in Figure 3 and conditions (1)-(2), this equilibrium is possible when both the cost of leader removal,  $y$ , and the cost repression,  $r$ , are relatively low, i.e. are justified by the milieu benefits for the third party.

The second of the above conditions implies that leaders are most likely to be removed from office when the costs of repression are low for the third party. Costs of bankrolling repression, for example, may be lowered by close collaboration/interconnectedness between the internal police and security apparati of the third party and its protégé governments (e.g.,

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<sup>21</sup>The threshold is  $\alpha > .5$ . When  $\alpha=0.5$ ,  $1 - 2r = (1 - r)(\alpha) - 1$ , i.e. the two equilibria conditions, represented by solid lines in Figure 3 overlap. To enhance visualization, we therefore hold  $\alpha$  at 0.6 rather than 0.5 in the right subfigure.

close cooperation between Russian and Ukrainian internal security forces). Greater degrees of dependence between the third party and its protégé make it easier (less costly) for the third party to bankroll repression, and also install a new protégé leader in the future, should the current leader be removed as a result of repression. This prediction sheds light on the motivating example of Ukraine, as well as on a number of other cases of removal of leaders propped up by third parties.

## Conclusion

State responses to popular protest have traditionally been modeled as a domestic phenomenon. Such studies often treat international influences in structural rather than strategic terms (e.g., control for proximity to a major power). Growing empirical evidence, however, suggests that, in a significant number of cases, the domestic-level interaction between the government and the protesters may be affected by involvement of an outside third party with its own stakes in the matter. The current study zeroes in on third-party involvement with the goal to affect the protester’s decision to challenge the government and the government’s response to such a challenge.

The study contributes to the understanding of the relationship between state leaders and their domestic audiences in cases, where the leader herself depends on support from an outside third party. Approaching the interaction from a game-theoretic perspective, we identify the conditions, under which the leader may choose to engage in inefficient repression against the protests, even at the risk of her own removal from office. We show that this puzzling outcome is possible, when the leader’s response to protests is influenced by an outside third party with broader regional or systemic goals. In the motivating example of Ukraine, Yanukovich is the protégé leader, and Russia acts as his third party sponsor. Yanukovich’s abrupt withdrawal from the EU Association treaty—a policy highly sought by a significant part of the population—triggered the Maidan protests. Despite every indication of the protesters’ strength—their large numbers that counted in hundreds of thousands,

their willingness to brave the cold of Ukrainian winter, and the threat of police brutality—Yanukovich made no serious attempts at accommodation, choosing instead to repress, despite the high risk of removal. We explain this outcome by zeroing in on Russia’s role in the crisis, in light of its chief concern with creating a “scarecrow” to help prevent other “Maidans” within its sphere of influence. Russia provided Yanukovich with both the means to carry out the repression against the protesters, and the safe option to flee the country into a comfortable retirement.

Our study also contributes to the game-theoretic literature on the onset of protests and repression, much of which has treated inefficient repression as off-equilibrium behavior (for exceptions, see Ritter 2014; Pierskalla 2010).<sup>22</sup> We can certainly treat Yanukovich’s decision to turn Kyiv’s Independence Square into a bloodbath as a terrible blunder. While plausible, such an explanation, however, is rather unsatisfying. Moreover, given what we know about the close relationship between Yanukovich and Russia, a more satisfying explanation would help provide insights regarding the reasons for, and implications of, possible Russian involvement.

The paper identifies a number of future research directions. For example, future research could explore relaxing the assumption that the protester demands are zero-sum, similar to recent work by Thomas, Reed, and Wolford (2016). This extension would help explain/identify cases of third party involvement on issues that may be viewed as more/less important by one of the conflicting parties. Future research could also explore more complex third party strategies, such as choosing between allocating repression assistance vs. developmental assistance.

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<sup>22</sup>Other research sometimes explains repression as part of a mixed strategy equilibrium, in which *Strong* protesters challenge the government with some positive probability, and the government mixes between opting for repression and accommodation. One way to think of the mixed strategy equilibrium is that, from time to time, governments accept some risk of losing office and incurs the costs of repression, in order to deter some future protests. E.g., Maidan was a calculated risk on the part of Yanukovich, in an attempt to intimidate future protesters. Mixed-strategy equilibrium explanations, however, are rather unintuitive. For cases with evidence of third-party involvement, repression as a part of pure strategy equilibria, as in our model, is both more intuitive and satisfying.

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# Tables and Figures

Figure 1: An Extensive-Form Three-Player Game of Protests and Repression with Incomplete Information about Protesters' Type

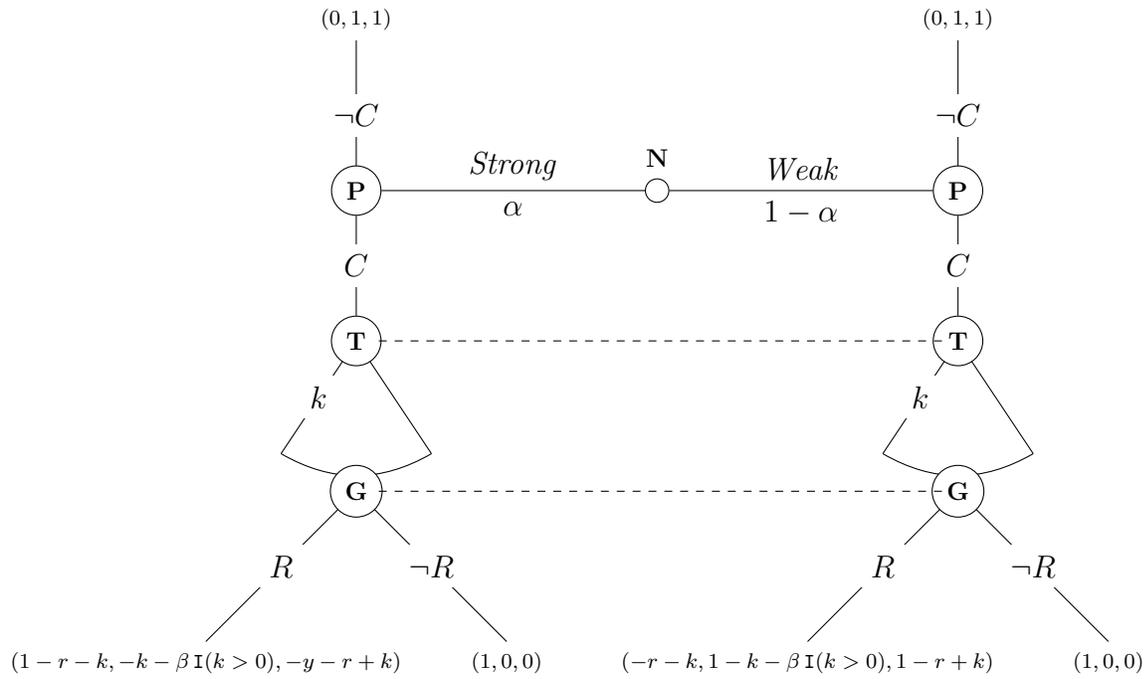


Figure 2: Effect of Third-Party Milieu Goals and Means ( $\beta$ ), and the Cost of Repression ( $r$ ) on Equilibria Outcomes.

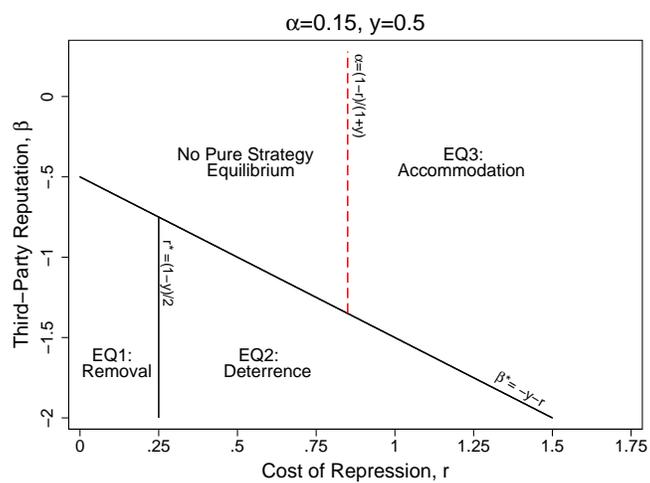


Figure 3: Effect of Regime Type Parameters ( $y$  and  $r$ ) on Equilibria Outcomes

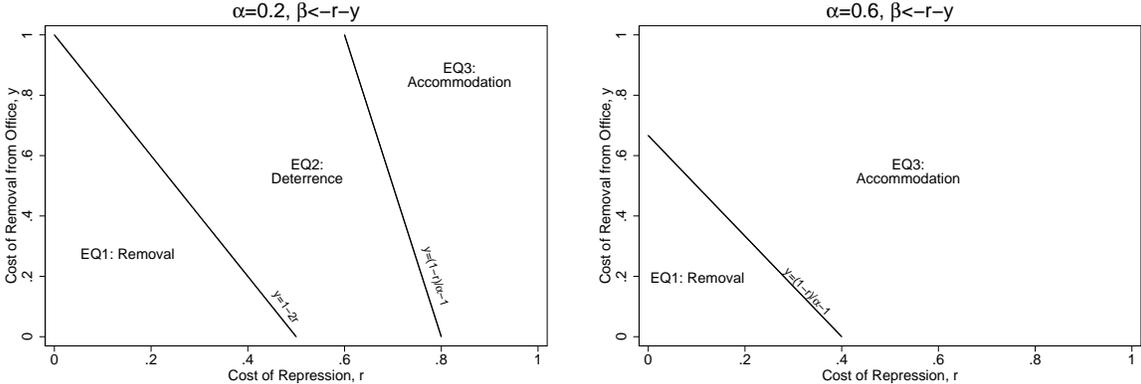


Table 1: Game Parameters

<i>Parameter</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Constraints</i>
$\alpha$	Probability that the protester's are strong	$0 < \alpha < 1$
$r$	Cost of repression	$r > 0$
$\beta$	Third party's broader cost/benefit from achieving milieu goals	$-\infty < \beta < +\infty$
$y$	Cost of being removed from office	$y > 0$

Table 2: Overt Support for the Government by a Third-Party State During a Protest Campaign, 1899-2006

	Major Repression		Total
	No	Yes	
No Overt 3 <sup>rd</sup> Party Support for Government	31 (14.16)	188 (85.84)	219 (100)
Overt 3 <sup>rd</sup> Party Support for Government	7 (6.73)	97 (93.27)	104 (100)
Total	38 (11.76)	285 (88.24)	323 (100)

*Source:* Chenoweth and Stephan (2011). Numbers in parentheses represent percent, by row.  $\chi_1^2 = 3.74, p = 0.053$

Table 3: Post-Tenure Fate of Puppet Leaders, 1899-2006

	<i>Safe Retirement</i>		<i>No Safe Retirement</i>		<i>Indeterminable</i>			
Stayed in Country	22	43%	Imprisoned	6	12%	Natural Death	2	4%
Exile	17	33%	Executed	2	4%	Assassinated	2	4%
<i>Total:</i>	39	76%	<i>Total:</i>	8	16%	<i>Total:</i>	4	8%

Table 4: Third Party Type and Post-Tenure Fate of Puppet Leaders, 1899-2006

Third Party	<i>Before 1990</i>		<i>1990-2006</i>	
	Not Safe	Safe	Not Safe	Safe
USSR/Russia	2	11 (9)	0	7 (4)
US	4	12 (5)	0	2 (0)
Britain	0	2 (1)	1	0 (0)
Syria	0	1 (1)	0	1 (1)
China	0	1 (1)		
France	0	2 (0)		
Iran	1	0 (0)		

*Note:* Numbers in parenthesis indicate the number of cases in which leader was able to stay in his/her own country vs. go into exile to a different country.