

**Rethinking State Repression:  
Deterrence and Diversion in Central Asia's Autocracies**

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**Abstract:**

This paper examines the use of low-intensity, routine forms of repression (surveillance, harassment, detainment) to deter opposition and conceal corruption in Central Asia. In contrast to studies associating levels of repression with perceptions of threats to a regime, however, the paper argues that acts of repression are: 1) far fewer in frequency than scholars believe; 2) are used selectively to deter regime opponents; and 3) are used to conceal the economic benefits of low-intensity coercion. Through a combination of quantitative data and expert interviews (conducted in the region in 2016 and 2017), the paper demonstrates that many visible aspects of state repression are a performance that serves to ensure the durability of autocratic regimes and enrich their government elites.

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## **Introduction**

Over the past decade, Freedom House and others have tracked the increasingly ‘global nature of the crackdown on civil society’ across authoritarian regimes. According to one study, only 17 countries passed more restrictive laws on foreign NGOs between 1955 and 1994, but from 1995 to 2012 86 countries passed more restrictive laws – constituting almost half of the world’s states (Dupuy, Ron and Prakash). Such everyday repressive measures, using various methods of low-intensity coercion, are believed to be frequent, omnipresent forms of social and political control in semi-democratic, hybrid regimes (Levitsky and Way 2010). Yet, there is less known about how frequently and with what purpose governments apply those restrictions on civil societies, opposition activists and the media.

Through the example of Central Asia, this paper examines how the use of low-intensity, routine forms of repression (surveillance, harassment, detainment) is designed to deter opposition and divert attention from malfeasance and corruption in hybrid regimes. In contrast to studies associating levels of repression with perceptions of threats to a regime, I argue that acts of repression are: 1) far fewer in frequency than scholars believe; 2) are used selectively and intermittently to deter regime opponents; and 3) are used to conceal the economic benefits derived from the threat of (rather than acts of) violence. Using a combination of descriptive statistics and expert interviews (conducted in the region in 2016 and 2017), the paper demonstrates that many visible aspects of state repression are a performance that serves to produce an image of an all-powerful, pervasive system of social controls that is far from the reality. As elaborated below, this performance of repression brings a number of advantages to hybrid regimes and plays an important role in ensuring their longevity.

Through its analysis of repression, this paper makes several contributions to the comparative study of authoritarianism. First, it contributes to a growing body of theory on the different forms and degrees of repression that are applied in authoritarian regimes. Most explanations attribute variation in repression to pre-existing features of the regime (such as elite cohesion born out of contentious regime origins or coercive capacity) or to levels of mobilization challenging the regime (Levitsky and Way 2010; Davenport 2007; Bellin 2004). In many cases, however, shifts in repression do not hinge on elite cohesion or coercive capacity and do not correlate with the timing of mobilizational threats to the regime. In moving away from a focus on the *capability* of states to use repression to a focus on the *willingness* of regimes to repress, this article identifies an important dimension – strategies of performing repression – that better explains why some authoritarian regimes apply repressive measures to social and political organizations in society while others do not.

Second, its substantive focus on the use of state violence to marginalize nongovernmental organizations, opposition groups, and independent media advances our understanding of the broader trend of authoritarian backsliding over the past decade (Bush 2015; Dreden and Howard 2016). Considerable optimism about the global reach of NGOs marked much of the literature in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Risse-Kappen 2005; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Wapner 1995). Yet, that promise has not been realized in part because of the repressive measures applied in some states (Cooley and Ron 2002). This paper helps unpack how and why repression of NGOs has been pursued, and how that has reinforced many of the recently observed authoritarian reversals.

Third, the article makes an empirical contribution to the study of repression in Central Asia's autocratic regimes by staking out a distinct form of performance politics in the region. Frequently viewed as among the world's most repressive regimes, Central Asian state

apparatuses in fact carry out acts of low-intensity coercion far less than assumed, using repression intermittently and selectively against media, politicians, and those in its civil society sector in order to deter opposition and deflect attention from its far more important role: the business side of threatened violence. This advances our understanding of repression by highlighting the more frequent practice (and perhaps underlying logic) of security and law enforcement apparatuses, which exemplify Charles Tilly's notion of a protection racket state (1985).

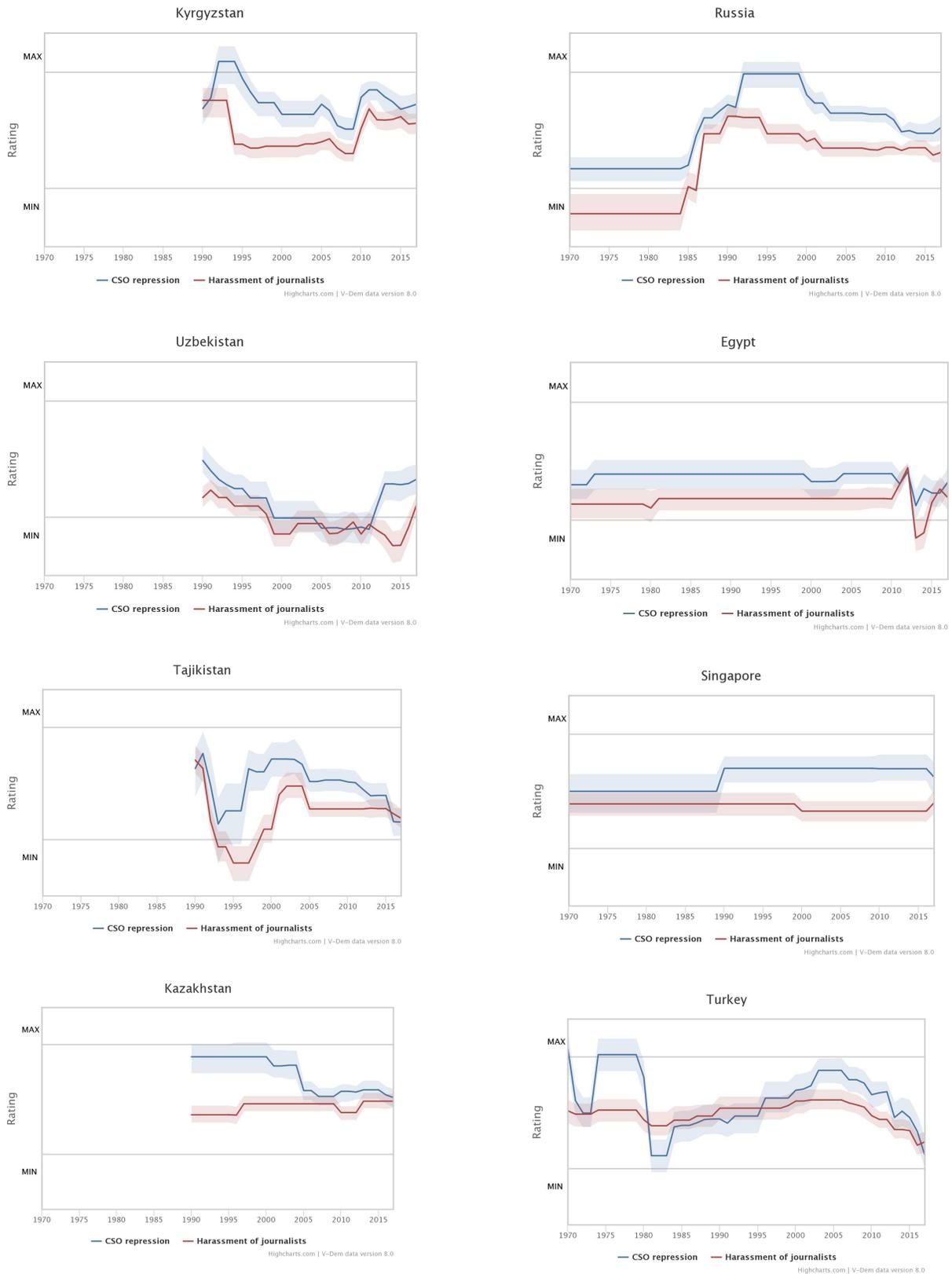
Using descriptive statistics on Central Asia as well as expert interviews on the use of repression in Tajikistan, this paper specifies the logic by which low-intensity repression is performed as a means of deterring opposition and concealing corruption within autocratic regimes. The remainder of the article consists of five sections. First, it reviews the comparative study of authoritarianism to elucidate competing arguments on the nature of repression. Second, it puts forth an argument on performative aspects of repression – as a means of deterrence and diversion. Third, it applies the argument to the cases of Central Asia. Finally, it concludes with a discussion of potentially useful avenues of future research.

### **The Puzzle of Repression in Central Asia**

Central Asia is regularly viewed as a region with some of the world's most autocratic and most repressive regimes. It is regularly ranked very low on cross-national indices (such as Freedom House, V-Dem, and Polity). It is broadly assumed that repression and autocracy are mutually reinforcing, intrinsically linked, and positively correlated. Indeed, most studies tracking cross-national patterns of authoritarianism have looked to commensurate levels of repression in their explanatory accounts (Acemoglu and Robinson 2005; Albertus and Menaldo 2012). This is also

true of more specific studies that seek to explain the use of low-intensity repression, an everyday form that is more subtle and calibrated (Levitsky and Way 2010). This type of repressive activity—such as tightening regulatory controls over civil society organizations and independent businesses, detaining and harassing opposition leaders, shuttering unwanted religious institutions, or stifling critical media outlets—constitute “civil liberty violations” and they are interpreted as a proportional response by regimes that seek to constrain, not eliminate, actors and narrow their avenues for challenging the regime (Davenport 2007b).

Figure 1. V-Dem Country Graphs on Repression of Civil Society Organizations and Journalists



The underlying assumption in this literature that repression and authoritarianism are intrinsically linked, however, is not borne out in an initial survey of data on regimes in Central Asia. There is, in fact, a marked difference between the overall levels of autocracy in the region and regimes' actual uses of low-intensity repression. While governments in Central Asia is ranked far lower than other autocratic regimes on overall indices of democratization (i.e., they are rated as far more autocratic in general), their levels of low-intensity repression are not significantly greater than other quasi-democratic countries. As Figure 1 suggests, using specific V-Dem measures evaluating levels of low-intensity repression against civil society organizations and journalists, the differences between Central Asian regimes and several selected emerging democratic and quasi-democratic regimes (Egypt, Russia, Singapore, and Turkey), are surprisingly minor.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, other comparative data suggests that the actual number of civil society actors and media (both as individuals and organizations) that are harassed, attacked or killed by regimes in Central Asia is generally low (albeit punctuated with spikes in the wake of crises). From 2010 to 2017, annual uses of repression against individuals target fewer than 30 persons and against organizations generally fewer than 10 organizations (except for a spike in Kazakhstan).<sup>2</sup> While this data is obviously incomplete (and the actual number of acts of repression is higher), the pattern of attacks on civil society actors and media remains by and large far more consistent and selective than many indicators suggest.

In sum, while these regimes remain highly repressive, that level of repression is not maintained by consistently using numerous acts of low-intensity coercion. Instead, it appears that

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<sup>1</sup> "Min" scores refer to higher levels of repression; "Max" scores refer to lower levels of repression. This data is drawn from V-Dem, available at: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/CountryGraph/>.

<sup>2</sup> Based on data collected from *Nations in Transit* reports by Freedom House, multiple years, available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report-types/nations-transit>.

regimes use these forms of repression selectively and intermittently. The use is selective in that it is targeting specific organizations and individuals rather than carrying out a broad sweep (the latter a strategy frequently employed against alleged religious activists in the region). This appears to be by design; it is intended to create a “chilling effect” felt by others in these circles.<sup>3</sup> This pattern of repression not match what we typically assume about repression and autocracy and appears to run counter to most explanations of how repression works under authoritarianism.

### **The Comparative Study of Repression**

Whether they focus on proximate threats to the regime, coercive capacity, or international factors, most explanations of repression assume it is tightly linked to levels of authoritarian rule. Defined as “the actual or threatened use of physical sanctions against an individual or organization, within the territorial jurisdiction of the state, for the purpose of imposing a cost on the target as well as deterring specific activities and/or beliefs perceived to be challenging to government,” repression has been widely considered to be a basis of authoritarian persistence (Davenport 2007: 2). While some studies point to non-coercive sources of authoritarian persistence – such as rents or patronage – much of the literature has focused on the central role of repression as a source of regime longevity.<sup>4</sup> As we apply these explanations to the use of low-intensity repression in Central Asia, however, inconsistencies emerge, suggesting a need to de-link repression from authoritarianism and look more closely at the specific drivers of repression in their own right.

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<sup>3</sup> Ivan Franceschini and Elisa Nesossi, "State Repression of Chinese Labor NGOs: A Chilling Effect?," *The China Journal*, no. 80 (July 2018): 111-129.

<sup>4</sup> Recent work highlighting the non-coercive sources of authoritarian persistence include Svoboda 2012; Blaydes 2011; Magaloni 2008; Brownlee 2007; Geddes 1999.

One approach has explained repression as a consequence of the level of dissent. The extent of the behavioral threat to the regime determines the degree of repression designed to counter and eliminate it (Davenport 2007: 7-10). This is particularly the case when regimes confront large-scale forms of social protest, in which the timing, sequence, and levels of repression can have a direct effect on mobilization (Lichbach 1987; Davenport, Johnston and Mueller 2005). Indeed, states often respond to challenges to the status quo – such as uprisings or disturbances – with some form of increased level of repressive action.<sup>5</sup> These arguments certainly help explain variation over time and space in the application of repression, demonstrating how countries with regimes confronting a challenge will likely experience increases in acts of repression. According to Marat (2018), regimes in the region confront a variety of challenges, both rural and urban, leading them to apply very different responses. In addition, my survey of acts of repression targeting individuals (civil society activists, opposition figures, journalists, etc.) in Central Asia reflect this pattern: Kazakhstan has experienced a steady increase since 2011 in response to Zhanaozen protests, smaller disturbances that followed, and land protests in 2016; Kyrgyzstan has witnessed a slight rise during and after its 2017 presidential election; and Tajikistan has seen an increase as its regime has pursued a crackdown on political and religious opponents since 2015.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the crackdown on Uzbekistan’s NGO community after the 2005 Andijan Uprising has been well-documented (though it had already been underway before the uprising). Between these rare events, though, are stretches of time during which relatively few acts of repression are actually carried out. In short, threats to Central

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<sup>5</sup> Davenport (2007) refers to this as the ‘law of coercive responsiveness.’

<sup>6</sup> Based on data collected from *Nations in Transit* reports by Freedom House, multiple years, available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report-types/nations-transit>.

Asia regimes may explain rises and falls but they do not account for the overall sparse number of acts of repression – i.e., its selective use of repression in countering political opponents.

A second set of studies focuses on the coercive capacity of an existing regime, which enables rulers to extend the use of force as they wish. Critical to coercive capacity is the fiscal health of the regime, which enables salaries to be paid and modernized arms and ammunition to be supplied (Bellin 2004). A related aspect is the institutional reach of the state – the scope of coercion – so that the state can ‘maintain and check grassroots opposition activity’ that may be hidden from central authorities (Way and Levitsky 2006). In Central Asia, however, monitoring grassroots actors is far less, since NGOs are usually publicly registered, tax-paying (or tax-exempt) public entities, which aver underground opposition activity. Variation in coercive capacity, therefore, shapes the nature of low-intensity repression. Security apparatuses characterized by high organizational cohesion and capacity will be more likely to exercise discipline over state violence—targeting particular groups in society at the behest of the autocrats commanding them. Conversely, security forces with low cohesion and capacity will be more likely to break ranks, often utilizing their position to prey upon civilians collectively (Greitens 2016). However, Central Asia’s regimes vary considerably in their coercive capacity with some exercising higher levels of capacity – in part due to their control over economic resources (Markowitz & Omelicheva 2018) – yet they consistently exercise a highly selective use of repression against civil activists, political opposition, and independent media remains a puzzle. Coercive capacity, then, does not adequately account for this selective use of violence, especially in countries such as Tajikistan (after 2007) and Uzbekistan where security apparatuses have resources at their disposal.

A third set of arguments focuses on the effects of international factors on domestic uses of repression. Early studies highlighted the effects of external threat in shaping repressive infrastructures (Tilly 1992), and a handful of recent works have focused on changes in the international environment since the end of the Cold War (Cingranelli and Richards 1999; Levitsky and Way 2010). Yet, there remains little consensus on the effect of international conditions, such as economic globalization, on the use of state repression deployed by regimes (Hafner-Burton 2005). Extending such arguments to Central Asia, moreover, might attribute these divergent trajectories to differences in foreign military aid, yet the total volumes of assistance to countries in the region are in fact quite similar (Gorenburg 2014). Consequently, differences within the region's nature of authoritarian rule – threats to the longevity of regimes, levels of coercive capacity, access to international security assistance – do not adequately explain the surprisingly selective uses of repression against journalists, political opponents, and civil society activists in Central Asia. In order to better understand what drives repression, we must separate it from overarching trajectories of autocratic rule and investigate its own operating logic. In particular, this paper seeks to explore why acts of low-intensity repression targeting NGO, media, and political opposition actors are relatively rare and how this selective use of state violence benefits autocratic regimes.

### **The Benefits of Performing Repression**

This paper argues that regimes use low-intensity repression far more sparingly than is frequently assumed because states seek to project an image of pervasive repression. It contends that several benefits accrue from performing repression, and the greater the gap between image and reality, the greater the benefits for rulers seeking to enhance their autocratic control. This argument

draws on the logic of Margaret Levi's (1988) concept of "quasi-voluntary compliance," which holds that rulers (unable to enforce taxation across the entirety of its population) must rely on its publics voluntarily complying with its revenue collection. Publics comply, she contends, because rulers punish free-riders (i.e., the handful of those who refuse to pay). States similarly rely on quasi-voluntary compliance in their application of repression: as they enforce laws, subdue opponents, marginalize others in society, rulers similarly target a few dissenters through highly public acts of repression in order to engender broader compliance in society.

Rulers and the regimes they command, then, conduct a performance of repression that intends to engender a reimagining of the state as a single "personified object" among its public (and/or specific communities within it).<sup>7</sup> Performing repression differs considerably across regimes depending on factors such as historical and social context, the practices and norms within security institutions themselves, and the political objectives at the moment. In some autocratic regimes, the image may be one of a law-abiding security apparatus supporting agendas of political reform. In other autocratic regimes seeking to enhance their social control – as in the case of Tajikistan below – the image of the state projected is that of a pervasive security presence that can penetrate deep into society even as it carries out relatively few actual acts of repression.

Regardless of the image a state seeks to project, however, there are several advantages to performing repression. First, it addresses the problem of limited coercive capacity. No state has the resources and capacity to apply repression across its society completely, but this is especially the case with autocratic regimes in command of infrastructurally weak security apparatuses (Migdal 1988). While some regimes have the advantage of accessible and concentrated resource wealth to fund their security agencies (Bellin 2004), fiscal foundations do not always translate

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<sup>7</sup> This term "personified object" comes from Reeves et al. 2014, p. 15). See also Heathershaw and Schatz (2014).

into effective coercion. Performing repression enables a regime to compensate for those gaps in its coercive capacity that would otherwise limit its wider application of repression. Second, it reduces the transaction costs involved in any application of repression, enabling the regime to maximize the benefit (i.e., deterring opponents to challenge or question the regime) at a minimal cost. While this benefit is easier to calculate as an aspect of Levi's formulation of a revenue-seeking state, it nevertheless promises a more cost-efficient modality of rule in that generating compliance demands fewer expenditures by the regime. Third, it fosters fear in the minds of the public, thereby preventing them from challenging the authority of law enforcement or security organs. This has the effect of minimizing – if not altogether removing – opportunities of imposing the public's accountability over these apparatuses of the state. Fourth, it opens the way for law enforcement and security organizations to engage in various forms of predation, translating their monopolized control over violence into a thriving business of bribery, extortion, racketeering, and related activities.

### **The Performance of Repression in Tajikistan**

The case of Tajikistan illustrates several of the benefits of performing repression. Following its civil war, Tajikistan's central government struggled to re-establish control over many parts of the country. One regime strategy for stabilizing postwar Tajikistan was to cede control over key institutions (including parts of the security apparatus) to former commanders and prominent politicians and allow them to establish ties to organized criminal groups and the drug trade (Heathershaw 2009; Markowitz 2013; Driscoll 2015). By the late 1990s, a weak central government left Tajikistan with degraded security capacities to address the rise of drug trafficking and organized criminal activity in the country (much of it protected by local elites).

For much of the mid-1990s, former commanders-turned-politicians competed for state offices and at times openly revolted against President Emomali Rahmon's government.

Over the past 20 years, however, Tajikistan's security apparatus has markedly changed, shaped by an increasingly closed political environment in which the authoritarian regime seeks to retain its control over the drug trade. It has supported substantial domestic and foreign investment in Tajikistan's security apparatus generally and on its border with Afghanistan. Stark advancements in security capabilities emerged in specific areas, resulting in extensive closed circuit TV monitoring throughout parts of Dushanbe, forensic resources, border infrastructure, and technical resources of special forces.<sup>8</sup> As one observer noted, it is widely held in Tajikistan that this recent investment in law enforcement and security was actually being used by the Rahmon family to enhance control over the population and to eliminate internal rivals – thereby consolidate and retain its control over all major assets in the country.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, the use of this coercive capacity has been carefully calibrated. Upon the supposed discovery of a coup attempt against the regime in 2015, the government has significantly intensified repression, but much of this repression has been selective, mainly targeting political groups. In the wake of the alleged coup attempt, the regime arrested over 150 members of the country's main opposition party, Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) and a small number of members of Group 24, another opposition group living abroad, were targeted with arrest or assassination (and their families in Tajikistan were harassed as well). While the number of acts of repression have certainly increased, they were far less than the image that those acts projected. A series of expert interviews in Tajikistan in 2016 and 2017 provide support for the claim that the state's ratcheting up its repression against political opponents had fostered a broader

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<sup>8</sup> Interview #16 with international NGO worker A, Dushanbe, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Interview #16 with international NGO worker A, Dushanbe, 2017.

impression on those in the media and (the mostly non-governmental organizations within) civil society.

In Tajikistan, moreover, the deterrence is acutely felt in the wake of the country's civil war. As one observer explained, the extensive presence of state security is felt in many areas and this has an effect of dampening dissent: "For several years, terrorism or terroristic acts have not been largely observed in the country. The government has its hands in all areas of the society, to the extent that people cannot publicly criticize any governmental agencies nor hold them responsible; the rules and regulations in regard to everything – such as making business, practicing promises of liberty – are so strict that almost all of the population agree with such societal structure unintentionally; people are largely afraid of the civil war and the fear of how holding anti-governmental demonstrations and strikes may lead to another conflict or unrest in the country. Similarly, a US government official based in Dushanbe attributed everyday security in the capital to the effectiveness of the regime's repressive measures.<sup>10</sup> This psychological legacy of civil war was further noted by another observer: "Generally, low levels of social discontent – a willingness to endure many problems without protesting – enables the government to exercise more security-led controls over the population. In part due to social factors and in part due to its legacy of civil war (and fear of another), there is a low desire to protest – which the government exploits in using repression and security agencies to stay in power."<sup>11</sup> As another observer noted, after waiting for years for Tajikistan to experience some implosion or state failure, he was now convinced that these predictions were overblown and inaccurate – and that "the people here are just way more resilient than we think." This resilience was due in part to the

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<sup>10</sup> Interview #?? with US government official, Dushanbe, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Interview #26 with IO worker A, Dushanbe, 2017.

population being used to living at a low standard of living but also due to the lingering trauma of the civil war.<sup>12</sup>

The impression among many in the NGO sector is that the reach of security services is extraordinarily extensive. This has the benefit of reducing the transaction costs of applying actual repression. By fostering fear of imminent intervention by law enforcement or security organs (i.e., inspections, organizational closures, arrest), the regime engenders self-censorship of public criticism and potential opposition or NGO actors self-selecting out of more contentious challenges to the regime. As one reflected, “If during the civil war most agencies, particularly MIA and Drug Control agency did not have much power, or even the latter did not exist for some time, by now they have upgraded themselves in terms of their professional and technical/material capability. Now these agencies reach every house, everybody they think is suspicious, and even outside the country.”<sup>13</sup> According to another NGO worker in Dushanbe, “the political environment is increasingly oppressive – anyone who speaks against the government is fired from their job and faces likely lawsuits. One may object to the government, but one cannot publicly express it. This in turn undercuts officials accountability to the public and eliminates means of public sentiment or civil society pressure influencing government. For instance, if there is the theft of \$100 million supposedly invested in Dushanbe, there is no way for us to even ask where it went – we are not even allowed to ask this question.”<sup>14</sup> These views were mirrored by another NGO staff member, who concluded that the government has, over the past 2-3 years, effectively completed its full domination and control over opposition figures and independent local elites in the various regions. This was done by eliminating the independent power bases of

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<sup>12</sup> Interview #32 with international NGO worker B, Dushanbe 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Interview #25 with NGO worker D, Dushanbe, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Interview #28 with NGO worker E, Dushanbe, 2017.

local officials, the power of informal local leaders in Rasht, GBAO and elsewhere, and especially with the closing of the IRP. On the IRP, many who see the state's repression as extensive point to the arrest of the 13-14 senior leadership of the IRP or of the exile of other top leaders, as well as the arrest of 150 other mid-level IRP leaders, who have received very long prison sentences (for life, 20 years, 10 years, etc.).<sup>15</sup> In the wake of these arrests, which over 1000 IRP activists have fled the country.

The effects of repression are similarly experienced among independent analysts and academics. As one prominent academic lamented, there was a lot of optimism in Tajikistan in the late 1990s/early 2000s that was absent today. Optimism about political openness, political inclusion, and overall better prospects for the country's future. During the peace process in the late 1990s and at the end of the civil war, there were lots of fellow academics taking on the role of a public intellectual, speaking and writing about democratic development and willing to publicly oppose or criticize the government for its shortcomings. Now they are all silent and afraid to speak out. Many, he said, urge him to write about the government and he says to them, "why don't you write something?" He further noted that the silence of political opposition is not only due to government repression; it is also self-imposed by many who are unwilling to upset society since they fear another civil war or other disturbance/conflict in society. They are greatly affected, he said, by their experience of the civil war, which still weighs heavily on people.<sup>16</sup>

Much of the gap between the image and reality in repression serves to compensate for the regime's lack of coercive capacity. A number of respondents noted the limits of Tajikistan's security services even as they were being provided considerable technical and institutional resources. As one observer noted, corruption permeates security services in Tajikistan and "in

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<sup>15</sup> Interview #29 with NGO worker F, Dushanbe, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Interview #31 with Academic A, Dushanbe, 2017.

almost every agency there are people who cooperate with criminal actors, and there were situations when many staffers of law enforcement agencies themselves had been involved.”<sup>17</sup> Much of the involvement of security services in illicit economic activity is, at the local level, due to the low salaries of the staffers in these agencies.<sup>18</sup> As another noted, “There is also high turnover of personnel – of technical people who can advance law enforcement and security – because they receive a very low salary. The choice is either to quit (and do another job) or get involved in corruption.”<sup>19</sup> Law enforcement salaries are not only low but often withheld for extended periods of time. Speaking in 2017, one NGO staff person noted that law enforcement (especially police) and security staff have seen a drop in their pay and benefits over the past 2-3 years. This was due to financial constraints since the sanctions and economic slowdown in Russia that has greatly affected Tajikistan’s economy. Specifically, these staff lost hazard pay and benefits (credit or money to pay lower gas, electric, other utility bills and to pay for school supplies for their kids, clothes/uniforms for their kids going back to school each fall, and for sport activities for their kids). In addition, many receive their pay 1-2 months late and have to buy their groceries and other goods on credit as they wait to get paid. As the informant concluded “this raises questions about their loyalty – I can see this being a problem.”<sup>20</sup>

Another benefit of projecting this image of a highly repressive regime is that it leaves more time for the security apparatus to pursue convert their control over violence into various businesses, both licit and illicit. As another noted, there is a “high level of corruption” in the country and this “corruption is interlinked with the action of almost all departments and agencies in the public sector. Some businesses are taken away by these agencies through various ways and

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<sup>17</sup> Interview #25 with NGO worker D, Dushanbe, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Interview #25 with NGO worker D, Dushanbe, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Interview #26 with IO worker A, Dushanbe, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Interview #29 with NGO worker F, Dushanbe, 2017.

at the same time the business owners are shown guilty.”<sup>21</sup> Still another reflected on how corruption has heavily linked security apparatuses along the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border: “It is believed that the military together with border forces are sometimes engaged in illicit trade themselves, mainly in drug trafficking; and that is because the elite group controls them. Overlap or intersection often happens where their interests of the parties coincide. Several times in Khatlon region (predominantly, in Lower Panj and Shurabad district that border Afghanistan) it happened that many people from this side borrowed drugs from their Afghan counterparts but could not trade them or pay them back; in which case the Afghan people crossed the river and forced the indebted people to pay them back even in-kind. Often armed conflicts also occurred in these areas less controlled by border patrol, witnessed by local residents. Sometimes even local residents complained that they witnessed how people in expensive SUVs drove nearby, had conflicts and then even attracted young people from their areas in their “dirty business” – for some of these youth the consequences mostly were ending in jail or even death as a result of tensions between the sides.”<sup>22</sup>

In fact, the focus of repression in Tajikistan often combines political and economic control. As one NGO staff person noted, conflicts occurring within security agencies and between them and other societal actors (such as those incidents in 2010, 2012, 2014) differ significantly across regions. In GBAO, these outbreaks of violence mainly stem from disputes between local elites and the center over controlling territory and the drug trade. In Rasht valley, these outbreaks mainly occurring as control being established over IRP and other elites – as well as gaining control over coal mining operations in the region (which are now owned by a relative of the ruling family). Despite these differences, most of these conflicts consist of a combination

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<sup>21</sup> Interview #22 with NGO worker B, Dushanbe, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Interview #23 with NGO worker C, Dushanbe, 2016.

of gaining political control over territory, acquiring ownership/control of economic assets, and eliminating/reducing the autonomy of local elites (many of whom were formerly tied to the UTO or political opposition).<sup>23</sup>

There are also economic pressures driving the enhanced use of repression as a means of extracting revenue for the state. As a journalist explained, the regime’s incentives had recently changed as a result of the sanctions on Russia and Tajikistan’s economic downturn since 2014. As migrant laborers returned from Russia in greater numbers, the overall level of remittances has declined sharply over the past 2-3 years – dropping about 60 percent. This loss of income has meant a loss of extractable wealth available to the government and, in turn, has led the government to be “tightening the screws” to extract more income from society and from economic actors – more taxation, inspections, and fines to be paid. The tax inspectorate has been particularly aggressive since 2014. For instance, it has in some cases forced companies or industries to pay this year’s tax and next year’s tax all at once. And if people oppose this, they get hit with more fines and penalties, as well as the possibility of arrest.<sup>24</sup>

## **Conclusion**

TO BE COMPLETED

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<sup>23</sup> Interview #29 with NGO worker F, Dushanbe, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Interview #30 with Journalist A, Dushanbe, 2017.

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