A theory on the adverse effects of repression

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Two confessions before we start

1. The paper behind this talk is **aggressively technical**: an infinite-horizon dynamic game, subgame-perfect equilibria, and an appendix long enough to have its own weather.

   Today I have hidden almost all of it on purpose. You will see **one** probability and **zero** proofs.
   If you came for a fixed-point argument, I apologize. If you came for a nap, I have regrettably made that harder.

2. This is a paper about **dictators**, and it somehow landed in an **Industrial Organization** session.

   I will be honest: I had to look up what IO stood for.
   But it fits far better than I expected. Let me translate.

This is really an entry model in disguise

Strip out the politics and you have a familiar IO story.

Politics		Industrial organization
Incumbent regime	$\Longleftrightarrow$	Dominant firm
Opposition factions		Potential entrants
Repression R		Entry cost / fixed cost
Cooperate vs. defect		Collude vs. compete
Staying in power		Market dominance

The punchline is pure IO: raising rivals' entry costs can backfire, because the few who remain may find it **easier to collude**.

Where we are going

1. **The puzzle** why don't incumbents just maximize repression?
2. **Motivation** four regimes, one recurring pattern
3. **Where we fit** literature and contribution
4. **The model** two decisions in the shadow of repression
5. **Results** why survival is hump-shaped in repression
6. **Takeaways**

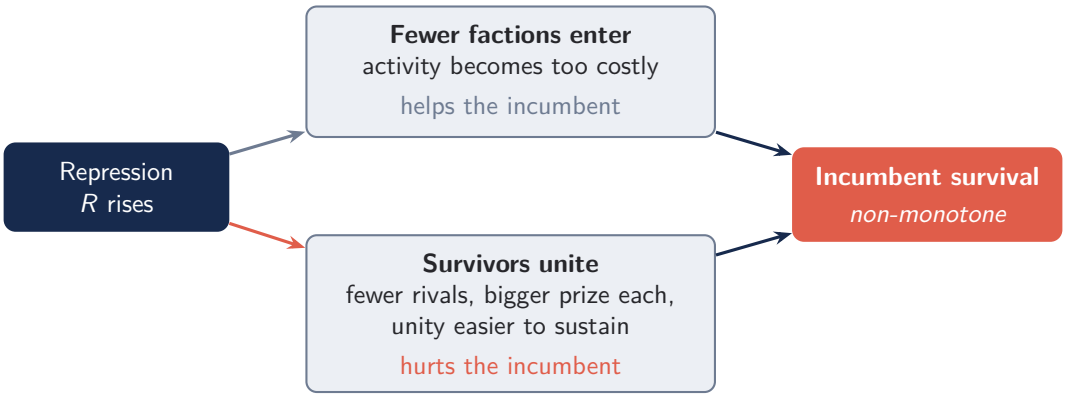
The puzzle

- Repression is a core instrument for holding power: it raises the cost of opposing the incumbent.
- **Standard logic:** an incumbent with the capacity to repress should use it to the fullest.
- **Yet many do not.** They stop well short of the maximum, mixing limited repression with open (if unfair) elections.

The question

If repression discourages opposition,
why is maximal repression so often not the safest strategy?

Two effects pulling in opposite directions



The whole talk is about which effect wins, and when.

Four regimes, one recurring pattern

Russia	Turkey	Venezuela	Hungary
moderate repression	repression intensified	escalating repression	other tools, same effect
opposition **stayed divided**	**divided** → **united**, within one country	opposition **drew together**	a **single challenger**

- The opposition stays **divided** where the environment leaves room to go it alone.
- It moves toward **cooperation** as that room narrows.
- Illustrations, not tests. But the same behavioral pattern recurs.

Three blocks of literature

A. Repression and dissent

Repression can deter *or* provoke; it distorts information and creates control problems.

but the opposition is treated **in aggregate**

B. Opposition fragmentation & coalitions

Unified oppositions are far better at unseating incumbents, yet unity is hard to build and to sustain.

entry and unity studied **separately**

C. The incumbent's survival toolkit

Calibrated repression alongside institutions, coalition management, information control.

repression is **one instrument among many**

The gap: nobody combines the two opposition responses — **whether to enter** and **whether to unite** — in one dynamic model and traces the consequence for the incumbent.

Contribution

1. A **dynamic model** in which a single level of repression shapes **two** opposition decisions at once: whether to become active, and whether to cooperate.

2. A **non-monotonicity result**: the incumbent's probability of staying in power is **hump-shaped** in repression.

3. A **rationale** for self-limited repression: incumbents may rationally hold back **even when repression carries no external cost**.

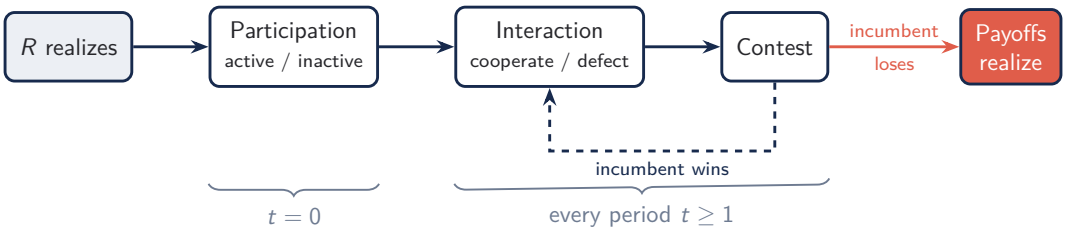
The model in one breath

- One **incumbent** and many potential **opposition factions**.
- A level of repression $R > 0$ is fixed once and for all. Every active faction pays R each period.
- The game repeats until the incumbent loses. Each period there is a contest for power.

Two decisions drive everything:

Participation (once, at the start)	Interaction (every period)
become **active** or stay **inactive**	**cooperate** or **defect**
active = visible = exposed to R forever	unite behind a common front, or go it alone

Timing



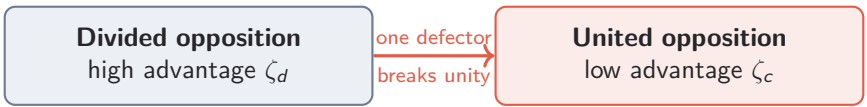
- Becoming active is **irreversible**: once visible to the regime, you keep paying R.
- Cooperation is **revisited every period**: nothing forces the opposition to stay united.

The contest: the only formula in the talk

With n active factions, the incumbent survives with probability

$$p = \frac{\zeta}{\zeta + n}.$$

- More rivals $n \Rightarrow$ the incumbent is **less** likely to survive.
- ζ is the incumbent's **structural advantage**. Crucially, it depends on *unity*:



$\zeta_c < \zeta_d$: a unified front is the incumbent's nightmare.
A single defector is enough to restore the higher advantage ζ_d.

Payoffs, informally

When the incumbent falls, the game ends:

- The faction that wins takes office: value Π_1.
- Everyone else, even the inactive, gains from the fall: value Π_0.

  With $0 < \Pi_0 < \Pi_1$.

The core tension

Everyone wants the incumbent gone ($\Pi_0 > 0$),
but everyone would rather be **the one** who takes office ($\Pi_1 > \Pi_0$).

That gap $\Pi_1 - \Pi_0$ is exactly what makes cooperation fragile.

Two ways the opposition can organize

We look for stable outcomes and find **two**.

Defection equilibrium

Everyone defects. The opposition is a set of independent contenders.

Exists when repression is *low*.

Cooperation equilibrium

Everyone cooperates. The opposition is a single united front.

Exists when repression is *intermediate* — neither too low nor too high.

- Too **low**: a faction happily defects to grab office for itself ⇒ unity breaks.
- Too **high**: nobody bothers to be active at all ⇒ nothing to unify.

Unity is an intermediate-repression phenomenon. Keep that in mind.

Result 1: when the opposition stays divided

Suppose factions coordinate on **defection** (low repression).

More repression $\Rightarrow$ fewer active rivals $\Rightarrow$ the incumbent is safer.

- Here the textbook intuition holds cleanly.
- Repression thins the field, and a thinner divided field is easy to beat.

If this were the whole story, incumbents would indeed maximize repression.

Result 2: when the opposition can unite

Suppose factions coordinate on **cooperation** (intermediate repression).
Now survival is non-monotone in repression.

Higher repression here

Fewer factions bother to be active at all

$\Rightarrow$ smaller opposition

$\Rightarrow$ incumbent **safer**

Intermediate repression here

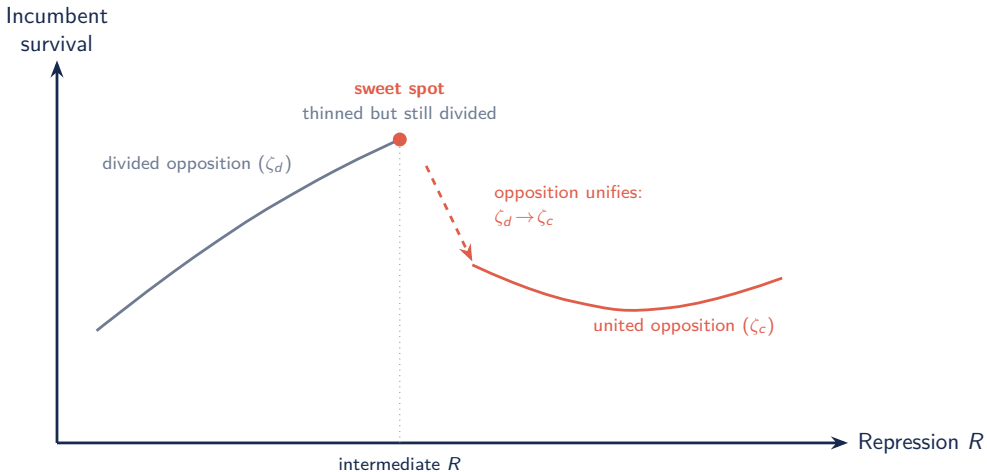
Repression makes losing more painful, so unity is *easier* to sustain

$\Rightarrow$ more factions unite

$\Rightarrow$ incumbent **more exposed**

The counterintuitive piece: in this zone, turning up repression can strengthen the opposition by cementing its unity.

The punchline: survival is hump-shaped



The incumbent's chances peak at intermediate repression.

Why maximal repression backfires

- At low repression: a crowded, squabbling opposition. Manageable.
- Turn repression up a little: rivals drop out, the field thins. **Good for the incumbent.**
- Turn it up further: the survivors have every reason to close ranks. Bad for the incumbent.

The safest choice is often **intermediate repression**:
enough to thin the opposition, not so much that it forces them together.

And this holds even when repression is completely free.

Back to the cases

- **Russia (2004–2011):** moderate repression, a fragmented Duma opposition, a secure incumbent. the sweet spot
- **Turkey (post-2016):** repression pushed past the point where division paid, and the opposition consolidated. over the peak
- **Venezuela (Maduro):** escalating repression met by a broad united front (MUD) winning a super-majority. over the peak
- **Hungary (Orbán):** different tools, same shape — pressure sharpened a single dominant adversary. over the peak

The model does not explain everything in these cases.
It explains the one behavioral regularity that recurs across them.

What is still open

A few extensions we are working through:

- Letting the incumbent **adjust** repression over time, rather than fixing it once.
- Allowing factions to **exit** and escape repression, not only to avoid entering.
- Softening the **all-or-nothing** unity assumption: our result survives as the limit of "cooperation benefits are sufficiently convex".
- Letting repression also raise the stakes (Π_0, Π_1 rising in R), which only **strengthens** the mechanism.

Takeaways

1. Repression does two things at once: it **thins** the opposition and it **unites** whoever remains.

2. These pull in opposite directions, so the incumbent's survival is **hump-shaped** in repression.

3. **Maximal repression is rarely optimal** — intermediate repression is the incumbent's sweet spot, even with no external cost.

For the IO room: raising rivals' entry costs can backfire when it makes the survivors collude.

Thank you

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