

The Economic Legacies of Repression

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Authoritarian regimes and dictatorships often engage in repression to control the masses. Indeed, repressive campaigns may target specific groups such as those educated or middle-class and have long-term effects. While research has examined the political legacies of such repression, much less is known about the economic consequences of repression. In a new [article](#) published in the *American Political Science Review*, Donald Grasse demonstrates that villages in more repressive zones during the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) regime in Cambodia are poorer today and asserts that this developmental persistence is due to low human capital. His research highlights the economic legacies of repression and the channels by which repressive regimes have persistent economic effects.

When repressive regimes target higher educated members of society, it creates a skill gap between generations, exacerbating poverty. Grasse argues that poverty becomes self-perpetuating and persistent due to the legacy of repression and calls this the “poverty trap.” He understands the poverty trap to be made up of human capital, such as educational attainment, income levels, and health outcomes.

To test his theory, Grasse exploits a border that placed villages under two radically different military commanders during the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. One leader, Ta Mok, was an extreme loyalist to the dictator Pol Pot and was thus more repressive than the other leader Sy, who was more moderate. Comparing the villages on both sides of the border, Grasse is able to examine random exposure to different levels of repression. In addition, Grasse provides evidence consistent with his poverty trap explanation, suggesting that poverty traps in historically repressive areas are uniquely tied to contemporary development.

The results suggest that villages



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Pictured above: A historic banknote produced by the Khmer Rouge in 1975 showing a woman soldier holding a rocket propelled grenade launcher. Former Cambodian currency (Getty Images/AmandaLewis).

in more repressive areas are poorer today than villages in less repressive areas. Grasse also demonstrates that state repression creates developmental differences in societies that experienced repression using three measurements of human capital: education, labor, and health outcomes. The author provides detailed evidence from the Cambodian case to show that, by targeting human capital, authoritarian regimes spur poverty traps for years to come. First, villages that experienced more intense repression had higher rates of the population without education and lower literacy rates. Second, individuals in more repressive villages were also more likely to be informal workers—earning lower income. Third, he finds that children in villages with more intense repression are more underweight, suggesting that childhood food poverty is driving these health differences.

Overall, Grasse demonstrates that repressive regimes have long-term developmental consequences, because of lower levels of human capital. Grasse further shows that in authoritarian and repressive states, understanding subnational administration and delegation within the leadership of autocracies is important, as it may have varying impacts on the societies under their rule. The results highlight the importance of focusing on the developmental consequences of repression and the channels through which they occur. As states who experience mass repression rebuild societies, understanding that different repressive strategies may lead to different developmental consequences, is crucial to advancing our knowledge on the legacies of repression.

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