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From Collusion to Autonomy: Patterns of Hybrid Repression and Human Rights Activism

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Abstract

This article elaborates the notion of hybrid repression, understanding by this modalities of dissidence suppression that involve state and non-state actors interacting in various ways, from fully autonomous to close cooperation. It does so by proposing a framework to scrutinize repressive configurations on the basis of three analytical dimensions – the perpetrator of repression, the tactics used and the threats perpetrators respond to – and using this framework to perform a systematic qualitative analysis of 160 in-depth interviews with human rights activists in four different countries (Colombia, Egypt, Mexico and Kenya). On this basis, the article analytically distinguishes and empirically elaborates four different patterns of hybrid repression, namely: state rogue, corporate, communitarian and non-state armed repression. Our argument challenges the state-centric approach to political repression that still dominates much of the literature on contentious politics and comparative regime analysis, and it invites further research on how hybrid forms of repression manifest and operate in different types of social and political contexts, and in relation to different areas of activism.

Keywords: repression; activism; high risk; hybrid regime; political order

It is well established that activism and social mobilization are intrinsic components of political struggle both in democratic and authoritarian environments. This struggle is interactive, adaptive and dynamic, as the strategizing and innovation activists do to mobilize solidarity and promote change are shaped by the accommodative and repressive measures devised by opponents seeking to counter their efforts. Over the years, the study of these coevolving dynamics of mobilization and repression has become marked by two conventional presumptions. The first one, which we can define as the ‘Tillian hypothesis’, is that contentious mobilization involves civil society actors making demands against states that defend the status quo and

monopolize political control and the means of violent repression.¹ The second, what Helen Fein (1995) called the ‘murder-in-the-middle thesis’, is that the forceful repression of dissent is more common in regimes that are neither advanced liberal democracies nor high-capacity autocracies – as the former tend to operate via channelling tactics and the latter aim to deter protest and dissidence before they happen. These presumptions, we claim, support two problematic gaps. First, while a diverse literature points to the active and varied role of non-state actors in crafting and maintaining political and social order, the social movement and contentious politics literature has so far paid scant attention to these non-state actors and to their role in the repression of activism (Earl 2011; Ong 2018). At the same time, as noted by Abby Peterson and Mattias Wahlström (2014: 11), repression research remains centred on democratic and authoritarian contexts rather than on developments in that broader ‘leftover category of the middle’, where arguably overlaps between the state, civil society and private actors are more extensive and fluid.

In this article we tackle these two gaps by exploring what we call hybrid repression, understanding by this modalities of control of political activism and dissidence that involve actors who operate autonomously from state sanction, or who cooperate and/or are enabled by the state in a (semi-)official or clandestine manner. Drawing insight from diverse literatures covering the involvement of non-state actors in political governance and conflict, we argue that distinct modalities of hybrid repression can be examined on the basis of the interplay of three general analytical dimensions – the (constellation of) perpetrator(s) involved in repression, the tactics used and the type of threat to which perpetrators respond to. Following this, and a result of an in-depth analysis of interview data of 160 human rights activists at risk in four countries (Colombia, Egypt, Kenya and Mexico), we identify the primary features and logic of four distinct patterns of hybrid repression prevailing in our sample, namely: state rogue, corporate, communitarian and non-state armed repression.

While we do not suggest that these four patterns cover all the forms that hybrid repression may assume, nor presume that we are the first to highlight these hybrid configurations, we consider our article offers a multidimensional framework to systematically analyse the involvement of non-state actors in dissent control and to examine variation in how hybrid repression manifests and operates across contexts. As such, our argument not only adds to the increasing scholarly interest in the role of non-state actors in dissident repression, bringing together insights often scattered across different subfields and specialized discussions, but also challenges standard conceptions that see those actors as mere proxies of a given regime. We demonstrate that, more often than not, the repression of dissidence operates through complex linkages between state authorities and agencies and diverse civil society and private actors, which vary in the degree of alignment and coordination they involve and that are often articulated in what Javier Auyero (2007: 7) referred to as a grey zone, the space of muddled, semi-formal and often clandestine interactions between state and non-institutionalized actors involved ‘in the making of collective violence and in routine political life’. Moreover, we find that different configurations of actors are activated and different logics of repression mobilized depending on the issues activists challenge, meaning that repression works differently for different types of (human rights) activists. Lastly, demonstrating the

pervasiveness of hybrid repression across different political regimes and sociocultural contexts, our article sheds light on the realities of repression and risk most activists encounter in their routine lives. By nuancing the empirical realities of social mobilization and repression in messier but really existing ‘in-between’ environments, in four locations marked by long-lasting institutional deficits (i.e. impunity, corruption, crime), limited economic resources, truncated support networks, and the presence of an array of potential adversaries across the state and society, our article questions generic conceptions of political regimes (and associated repression repertoires) and claims that exposure to hybrid repression is more common and affects a far larger proportion of dissidents than the existing literature recognizes.

The article is structured in two substantive parts. First, we challenge conventional treatments of repression by considering an array of hybrid repressive configurations observed in diverse literatures, in the process providing analytical support to develop the framework that guides our empirical analysis. In the second, following the methodological discussion, we explore the four patterns identified in our dataset considering specific characteristics and manifestations.

Repression and conflict in the middle zone

The principal approaches to social movements and contentious politics, such as the influential political process theory, conceive regime openness and ‘the extent to which the regime suppresses or facilitates collective claims’ (McAdam and Tarrow 2019: 21) as basic features constituting political opportunity structures and the potential for collective action. Accompanying this is the idea that a fundamental task of activists and social movement actors is to mobilize support and resources to exploit these opportunities *while* countering or resisting repression. Repression in that sense is a constitutive factor not only of the functioning of state power but also of the emergence and evolution of collective mobilization.

This relationship is profound and well established. Charles Tilly famously argued that the state was quintessentially a protection racket, and also demonstrated that social movements emerged alongside the gradual democratization of the state – a process that, among other things, involved the lessening of repression in state–society relations and a greater protection of subjects and citizens from ‘arbitrary action by governmental agents’ (Tilly 2004: 14). Tilly further nuanced this point and argued that high-capacity democratic and authoritarian regimes showed low levels of violence in contentious interactions though varied in their tolerance for different contentious performances. In contrast, higher levels of violent repression were more common in low-capacity regimes, authoritarian or democratic, for the simple reason that these states lacked the resources to arbitrate contention effectively (Tilly 2006).

This line of argument has informed two conventional positions in the study of contentious politics and social movements: that the dynamics of social mobilization are largely regulated by *state* repression, and that democratic *states* are less repressive than authoritarian ones. However, this state-centric perspective is increasingly being problematized as reductive, as it rests on schematic conceptions of political regimes and state–society relations and underestimates the role of non-state actors

in regulating contentious action. On the other hand, comparative scholarship has found increasing validation for the notion that ‘mixed and transitional regimes, which combine elements of autocracy and democracy, are the most coercive’ (Davenport 2007: 11). This has been accompanied by greater recognition that the ‘nature of violence in new democratic settings was hybrid’, with political forms of violence coexisting with criminal forms enabled by deficiencies in the rule of law and conditions of generalized impunity (Feldmann and Luna 2022: 444; Villarreal 2021).

A diverse and interdisciplinary body of research testifies to these challenges. Literatures on armed politics and public authority more generally theorize and empirically demonstrate that the state may be the principal but by no means the sole actor involved in the provision of political order and public services. Indeed, a multiplicity of actors can perform governance functions over neighbourhoods, rural villages or parts of the national territory, either complementing or in competition with the state. This ranges from customary institutions and traditional authorities, such as religious entities and tribal bodies (De Waal and Ibreck 2013; Hunnicutt and Gbaintor-Johnson 2023), to non-state armed actors, such as rebels, militias or vigilante groups, that engage in different forms of public authority (Carey et al. 2015; Feldmann and Luna 2022; Hassan et al. 2022).

Political science and development studies, on the other hand, point to the different modalities through which political authorities exert influence over interest groups, social movements and other social groupings – via practices such as patronage, clientelism and corruption – for repressive and/or criminal purposes (Auyero 2007; Trejo and Ley 2020). These arrangements involve the orchestration of ‘violent irregulars’ and privatized forms of violence where repressive tasks are exerted by a third party ‘in complex relations of cooperation and competition with public security actors and with the state’ (Abrahamsen and Williams 2008). In South Korea, for instance, public authorities outsource tasks carrying risks of political backlash to private investors and companies who do the ‘dirty work’ of cracking down on dissenters (Porteux and Kim 2016). In Uganda and Israel, the security forces allow vigilante groups to manage routine security concerns (in the former) or manifest political dominance (in the latter) while ‘retaining the ability to determine post-hoc that vigilante activities were illegal and punishable by law’ (Tapscott 2023). These state–non-state actor linkages display varying degrees and forms of confrontation, incorporation and collaboration, with political actors sometimes maintaining a relationship of hierarchy over non-state groups, while in other settings non-state actors capture state agents (for instance, police, judges or politicians) and use these as their means of repression (Magaloni et al. 2020; Trejo and Ley 2020).

Taken together, these insights grant substance to the relevance of non-state actors in the provision of public order and point to different arrangements of state–society relations that may be actualized in incidences of hybrid repression. Moreover, while the literature suggests a link between hybrid regimes and ‘developing democracies’ and greater tolerance or propensity for forms of hybrid repression, we do not consider this relationship to be exclusive, with recent scholarship noting hybrid forms of dissent management present in liberal-democratic contexts (della Porta 2024; Ellefsen and Jämte 2023). In the section ahead we take insight from the reviewed literature to outline a general and parsimonious framework to conceive different patterns of hybrid repression, irrespective of regime type, on the

basis of three structuring dimensions: the actors responding to contentious challenges (*the perpetrators*), the type of repressive repertoires they deploy (*the tactics*) and the type of threat to which perpetrators respond to (*the target*).

The spectrum of repression

The following section proposes an approach to activist repression based on how these three dimensions can intersect, which serves us to distinguish analytically between different potential patterns of hybrid repression.

The first dimension comprises the actors that can engage in repression, the perpetrators. Here we discriminate three possibilities – respectively, state, grey zone and autonomous – which cover a range of actors and repressive configurations. The more common space, state repression, covers what the social movement literature generally understands as repression: forceful coordinated actions by state bodies and state-sanctioned agents to manage dissent. On the other end is autonomous repression. Here, we include non-state actors that decide to coerce and deter opponents on their own, even if this autonomy somehow results from specific political opportunity structures in the polity, as well as instances where certain state agents, such as individual politicians or elements of the security forces, ‘go rogue’, exploiting their jurisdictional authority but acting independently of any official mandate. In the middle, we place the zone of grey repression in line with the previous comment, considering a broad and dynamic range of possibilities through which state and non-state actors can orchestrate their actions to repress challengers – with scholars generally considering a spectrum of alignments ranging from integration and thick collusion to temporary alliances and looser forms of toleration and coexistence (Staniland 2015; Tapscott 2023).

The second dimension captures that repression can proceed through multiple tactics. We distinguish three types of repression, channelling, coercion and attrition, considering they vary in terms of the ‘directness’ of the repressive logic involved. Thus, channelling refers to those indirect tactics aimed at conditioning the behaviour of activists by shaping institutional or organizational incentive structures and capacities, for instance, by way of co-opting groups and communities, limiting access to resources or allies, criminalizing contentious expressions, or imposing restrictive or cumbersome administrative requirements (i.e. bureaucratization) (Earl 2003; Ellefsen and Jämte 2023). On the other end, coercive repression involves the imposition of *direct* physical restrictions or penalties on activists and/or their principal support network (family members, friends, colleagues etc.), with tactics ranging from movement restrictions and group persecution to individualized physical attacks, which vary in the level of violence.

In an intermediate position we situate attrition, seeking to capture modalities of repression that target primarily the capacity of activists to remain motivated rather than their physical integrity or general organizational incentives. We consider attrition manifest through tactics (or combinations of tactics) that seek to ‘wear out’ activists emotionally and induce negative attitudes (e.g. anxiety, pessimism, burn-out) and dysfunctional behaviours (e.g. social disengagement, distrust), leading activists to defect or moderate their activities (Peña et al. 2023; Starr et al. 2008; Yuen and Cheng 2017). For instance, intimidation through explicit or tacit threats

can induce anxiety, mistrust and pessimism, forcing activists into an inward-looking logic where they must weigh up and prevent potential harm rather than work for sociopolitical change (Boykoff 2007). Similarly, under protracted surveillance, activists may develop asocial and untrusting stances, replacing solidarity with ‘security cultures’ (Starr et al. 2008), while defamatory and stigmatizing tactics (especially by influential social forces) can generate interactional tensions between those affected and their social environment, with detrimental effects on motivation, coping and emotional well-being (Peña et al. 2023).

Two clarifications are relevant on this point. While these are ideal-types, in practice degrees of overlap exist – with channelling and coercive tactics generating attritional effects and certain attritional tactics resembling channelling (if general) or even coercion (if becoming highly restrictive). Second, giving the pervasiveness of digital technologies on the everyday life of individuals, we consider these repressive tactics can include offline and online aspects. While coercion works predominantly in the offline sphere, the other two types, channelling and attrition, can have offline, online and blended manifestations. For instance, governments or firms can ban certain groups or messages from online platforms (channelling), or activists can be harassed or monitored via their social media accounts (attrition) (e.g. Youmans and York 2012).

The third and final dimension acknowledges that, just as the state is not the only actor that can engage in repression, the state may not be the principal *target* of contentious activism. This is because social movements and activists can pursue change not only through policy changes but also by targeting social and cultural norms in society, through consciousness-raising, identity-building and agenda-setting (Ferree 2004; Van Dyke et al. 2004). At the same time, activism can be directed towards non-state institutions, such as corporations, universities, scientific bodies and so on, or to influence the general public – for instance, through disruptive tactics aimed at gaining media coverage (Amenta and Polletta 2019). These activities logically can elicit responses from actors beyond the state who see their interests, values or status challenged.

In this sense, we distinguish between activism that targets social norms, political regimes and sectoral and private interests, considering this orientation influences the pattern of repression that may ensue. Activists who target more general norms or practices are likely to face resistance from the state as well as from civil society actors, more or less organized, ranging from mobilized crowds and counter-movements to communal authorities. Again, research on vigilantism demonstrates that vigilante activism is often ‘geared towards the maintenance of communal, ethnic or sectarian order ... and aims to protect – or, if necessary, to reconstitute – the normative order of a particular community’ (Johnston 2001: 967). If activists address their demands and challenges directly to the government, it is likely that state authorities and security forces will be the primary respondents and drivers of repression, even if doing so through non-state allies. Lastly, contentious action may be aimed at sectoral and private interests, targeting the activities of certain organizations or interest groups, with large corporations being a common case. The response of private actors can be peaceful and legal, for instance, through public relations efforts, legal defences and organizational concessions, but in certain cases private actors can resort to aggressive and violent measures, with corporations

often exploiting their elite access or their financial capacity to hire repressive proxies (Huisman et al. 2022).

Undoubtedly, the connection between targets of activism and the political and social actors threatened by it is not one-to-one, since activists may adopt repertoires directed at multiple targets simultaneously and face responses from different ‘repressing coalitions’, formal or informal and more or less orchestrated (Soule 2009). These may consist of state or military authorities who give civil society groups a free hand when dealing with political dissidents or targeted minorities, for instance, homophobic groups in post-communist Europe or Israeli Jewish settlers in the occupied West Bank (Mos 2020). Similarly, corrupt politicians, police forces and criminal groups can craft unholy alliances, more or less asymmetric, to protect their common interests and deter troublesome opposition (Fahlberg 2023).

On this basis we consider that these three dimensions and their multiple combinations are useful to capture different patterns of hybrid repression. Consider, for instance, the ideal-typical conceptions in the literature of state-led repression in democratic and authoritarian settings, as shown in Figure 1.

While in both cases the main perpetrator is the state (with authoritarian states being perhaps more susceptible to relying on proxies), a divergence arises as democratic repression is presumed to take place primarily through channelling tactics (at least if dissidence remains non-violent), while authoritarian states would favour a combination of coercive and channelling and, as indicated by recent literature, more attritional methods (Guriev and Treisman 2022), even if these are applied pre-emptively. The type and intensity of repression is also expected to vary on whether social contenders target the political regime (or ruling elite) as such, social norms, or private interests, with democracies and autocracies varying in the overlaps that exist between these dimensions and the tolerance they have for different contentious repertoires and motives. Thus, though democracies tolerate a greater array of political and social dissent than autocracies (though still patrolling, sometimes aggressively, compliance with major cultural norms, political principles and

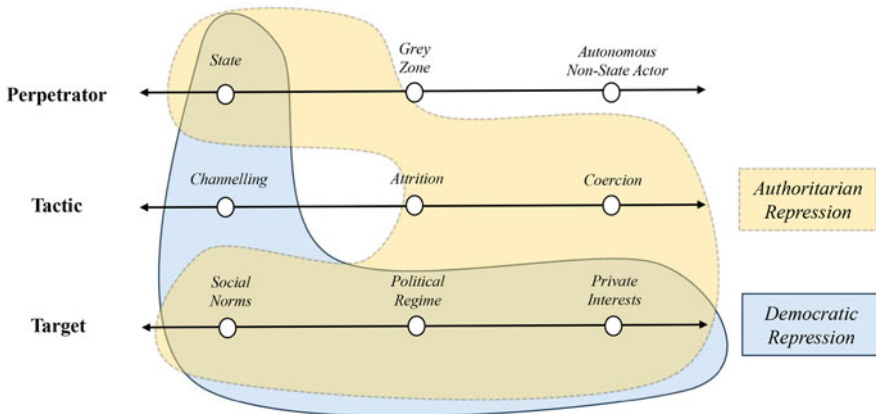


Figure 1. Patterns of State Repression.

social behaviours), autocracies do not repress all dissent similarly and can accommodate certain forms of protest (Chen 2011).

Following this illustration, in the next section we rely on this framework to explore different forms of hybrid repression and ‘violent pluralism’ (Feldmann and Luna 2022: 444), unearthing specific combinations of these analytical dimensions through an analysis of the aggregate experiences of different types of human rights activists working in different countries and circumstances.

Data and methodology

Our empirical analysis draws from 160 in-depth interviews with human right activists at risk working in four countries: Colombia (46), Egypt (39), Kenya (43) and Mexico (32). The selection of participants followed a purposive sampling strategy. We recruited participants who had experienced risks, threats or attacks within the past five years. Risk was defined in objective and subjective terms – that is, it refers to the concrete physical, legal, social or financial costs, and also to the more immaterial emotional and psychological consequences that activists bear as a result of their human rights activism. The selection of respondents and the conduct of interviews was carried out by local research teams of a man and a woman with knowledge and familiarity with the human rights community of each country. The interviews took place between July 2015 and November 2016 and were held in Spanish (Colombia and Mexico), Kiswahili or English (Kenya) and Arabic (Egypt). Particular emphasis was put on generating variation in terms of the activists interviewed. As a result, the dataset includes an equivalent number of men and women participants (45% vs 52%) and a very small number of gender non-conforming activists (3%), as well as variation in terms of type of activism, employment condition, place of activism, age, level of experience and topic of specialization. The latter included areas such as civil and political rights, economic, social and cultural rights, environmental governance, rural and indigenous rights, women, children, LGBTQI+ rights, post-conflict issues and political crimes, among others, which we grouped into encompassing categories according to the prevailing activity described by each interviewee (see Table 1). To ensure the security of interviewees, all personal data have been anonymized.

While interviews followed a common guide, participants were given ample space to tell their stories and to highlight the issues, factors and concerns they themselves considered as most relevant for their experience of risks, threat and deprivation. These detailed narratives provided us with a wealth of material concerning how different activists experienced repression. Furthermore, interviewees embedded their experiences into broader social and cultural contexts, highlighting how repression banked on and intersected with broader institutional, organizational and personal-level factors.

This uncommon combination of a large-N sample, qualitative depth and high variation thus provided an ideal opportunity to conduct social pattern analysis, an analytically focused and selective search for ‘cross-contextual similarity among seemingly dissimilar phenomena’ guided by ‘sensitizing concepts’ that narrow attention to certain aspects and situations (Zerubavel 2007: 136).

To systematize this analysis, we proceeded as follows. We first classified all transcripts according to general descriptive variables (country, gender, type of activism,

Table 1. General Description of Interviewed Human Rights Activists

	Colombia	Kenya	Egypt	Mexico	Total	
Women	23	21	17	23	84	53%
Women's and children's rights	2	11	7	10	30	
Conflict and justice issues	10	1	5	6	22	
Civil and political rights	3	3	5	1	12	
Land and indigenous rights	5	1		4	10	
LGBTQI+ issues	2	2		2	6	
Environmental rights	1	3			4	
Men	20	21	22	9	72	45%
Civil and political rights	3	8	15	3	29	
Land and indigenous rights	8	5	3	5	21	
Conflict and justice issues	5	1	2		8	
LGBTQI+ issues	3	1	2	1	7	
Women's and children's rights		6			6	
Environmental rights	1				1	
Gender non-conforming	3	0	1	0	4	3%
LGBTQI+	2		1		3	
Land and indigenous rights	1				1	
Total	46	42	40	32	160	100%

type of organization etc.) and then coded a number of adversarial conditions, repressive incidents and personal stressors described by the interviewees, with the assistance of MAXQDA software and a graduate research assistant. For each incident of repression mentioned, we coded the perpetrators and the repressive tactics used, as well as the impact on the activists and their immediate acquaintances. We also coded references to a range of environmental conditions – political, social or cultural – that according to our interviewees facilitated the exertion of repression and/or shaped the way activists experienced it. Once coding was completed, we conducted different forms of descriptive statistical and qualitative content analysis, looking at how perpetrators, tactics and activist characteristics interacted to generate consistent patterns of hybrid repression across contexts.

Relevantly, while the four countries were not selected according to a comparative logic, their particularities allow us to evaluate patterns of repression across distinct political environments with different modes of state–society relations and conflict cleavages. Hence, Colombia and Mexico are highly violent democracies, marked by criminal and paramilitary violence, militarized repression and high levels of impunity. The landscape of violence in the two countries differs, however: while Colombia is trying to end one of the longest civil wars in history, in Mexico widespread violence results from the strength of powerful criminal cartels and their

collusion with state forces. In comparison, Kenya's democracy is characterized by high levels of patrimonialism and is a canvas of competing and occasionally contentious classes, ethnicities and religious beliefs. Lastly, in Egypt, our data reflect an authoritarian environment where a failed democratic revolution led to a counter-revolutionary crackdown on civil society and political activism.

A final point here. As our sample is not representative, we refrain from generalizations linking a particular form of repression with specific countries or regime types, or areas of activism. Having said this, we are confident that our systematic qualitative analysis reveals relevant similarities in the form and operation of each pattern of repression across different sociopolitical environments, granting support to the consistency of our analytical propositions and conclusions.

The patterning of hybrid repression

Our analysis points to the presence of empirically distinguishable patterns of hybrid repression in our sample, leaving aside instances of state repression that, while indeed preponderant, are well known and widely discussed in the literature. Accordingly, our analysis first demonstrates that activists linked their experiences of repression with different constellations of perpetrators. As show in [Table 2](#), the map of perpetrators is suggestive of the presence of non-state and hybrid configurations, as not only did an important number of activists mention experiences of repression by civil society actors (32%) and criminal and paramilitary groups (29%), but some of them did so exclusively (13% and 7.5% respectively). Moreover, [Table 2](#) is also indicative of multiple and frequent grey-zone arrangements: while this table does not distinguish whether perpetrators acted separately or in concert, it does reveal that 60% of interviewed activists confronted repression from multiple perpetrators. Moreover, as discussed ahead, detailed qualitative analysis reveals multiple instances and forms of collusion, principally of security forces with civil society or criminal groups, as well as cases where state actors such as security forces or individual politicians engaged in repression in an independent or semi-independent manner.

Second, we observe that different perpetrators adopted different types of strategies, with intimidation being the most dominant, suffered by 79% of our interviewees – followed by criminalization (38%) and physical assaults (33%). Having said this, it is telling that violent tactics were more frequently employed by criminal and armed groups and by civil society groups (in different modalities), and less so by state rogue actors, suggesting that these, even if rogue, still exploited their capacity to mobilize relevant institutional and related reputational resources in their favour.

Lastly, our analysis reveals that different types of human rights activists, working on different issues and locations, were targeted by different groups of perpetrators – something expressive of our third dimension, the relationship between the target of activism and the repression elicited.

As shown in [Table 3](#), when activists worked on issues that were more 'political' and/or connected more closely to regime politics, like illegal persecution, civil rights violations, the rights of political prisoners, freedom of religion and the like, repression was mainly conducted by security forces and state-related agencies, while on more conflict-related and territorial issues, the response also involved (usually local) state actors as well as criminal and non-state armed groups (paramilitaries,

Table 2. Perpetrators of Repression

Perpetrators	Frequency	%
Security forces	30	18.8%
Civil society actors	21	13.1%
Criminal groups/paramilitary/armed groups	12	7.5%
Civil society actors + security forces	11	6.9%
Security forces + criminal groups/paramilitary/armed groups	10	6.3%
State + security forces	9	5.6%
State	7	4.4%
Individual politicians + security forces	6	3.8%
State + criminal groups/paramilitary/armed groups	6	3.8%
Individual politicians	5	3.1%
Civil society actors + individual politicians	4	2.5%
Individual politicians + security forces + criminal groups/paramilitary/armed groups + business	3	1.9%
Individual politicians + state + security forces + criminal groups/paramilitary/armed groups	2	1.3%
Individual politicians + state	2	1.3%
State + security forces + criminal groups/paramilitary/armed groups	2	1.3%
Individual politicians + criminal groups/paramilitary/armed groups	2	1.3%
Civil society actors + individual politicians + security forces	2	1.3%
Civil society actors + state + security forces	2	1.3%
Civil society actors + individual politicians + criminal groups/paramilitary/armed groups	2	1.3%
Civil society actors + security forces + criminal groups/paramilitary/armed groups	2	1.3%
Civil society actors + criminal groups/paramilitary/armed groups	2	1.3%
Other combinations	18	11.3%
Total	160	100%

militias). On the other hand, activists dealing with more social issues, such as women's and gender-minority rights, saw greater repression from civil society actors. Table 3 also confirms that the involvement of business in repression tends to concentrate on activists working on environmental and land and indigenous rights, who in countries in our sample confronted the interests of agribusinesses and mining industries, as well as of local politicians and criminal and armed groups acting in rural areas.

In the subsections below we build on this variation to further texturize and detail four patterns of hybrid repression, systematically synthesizing specific insights and illustrations from our data. Table 4 summarizes our findings.

Table 3. Perpetrators by Type of Activity (%)

Perpetrators	Civil and political rights	Conflict and justice issues	Environmental rights	Land and indigenous rights	LGBTQI+	Women's and children's rights	TOTAL
Security forces	27.7	20.5	4.8	24.1	6.0	16.9	100
Civil society actors	19.5	7.3	4.9	2.4	19.5	46.3	100
Criminal groups/ paramilitaries/armed groups	12.5	27.5	5.0	35.0	7.5	12.5	100
State	35.5	25.8	6.5	19.4		12.9	100
Individual politicians	22.2	18.5	14.8	18.5		25.9	100
Business	16.7		33.3	25.0		25.0	100

Table 4. Patterns of Hybrid Repression

	State	(1) State rogue	(2) Corporate	(3) Communitarian	(4) Non-state armed
Perpetrator	State agencies (public prosecutor, government ministries, governors)	Politicians (local and national MPs, state governors, mayors, members of political parties)	Companies, multinationals	Village residents, families of those accused of human rights violations, neighbours	Paramilitaries, organized crime groups, criminal gangs
	Security forces (police, army, intelligence services)	*Agent: gunmen, paramilitaries, criminal groups	*Agent: private security agents, paramilitaries		
Tactic	Democratic: prevalence of channeling tactics (criminalization, bureaucratization)	Intimidation, criminalization	Intimidation, co-optation, defamation, surveillance, criminalization	Intimidation, physical attacks	Intimidation, physical attacks
	Authoritarian: combination of channeling, coercion and attrition tactics				
Target of contention	Regime, social norms	Regime, private interests	Private interests	Social norms	Private interests
Underlying logic	Suppressing, controlling and discrediting organizations, groups and activists critical of the political regime	Silencing those who, through revealing misbehaviour, challenge politicians	Repressing resistance against extraction projects	Upholding traditional values and punishing transgressions	Territorial control, crime, extortion
Principal targets	State agencies: civil society organizations (NGOs, INGOS) advocating for political and civil rights and conflict and justice	Journalists, political and civil rights activists, environmental rights activists	Environmental rights activists, land and indigenous rights activists	Women's and children's rights activists, LGBTQI+ activists	Conflict and justice activists, land and indigenous rights activists
	Security forces: all types of activists				

State rogue repression

This first pattern captures repertoires of controlling political dissent where public agencies do not act in an officially sanctioned capacity but engage in repression to protect organizational or personalized interests. In our interviews, respondents mentioned numerous instances where the main threats came from individual politicians, such as governors and mayors, party members, parliamentarians and occasionally judges, and from police, military and other security service personnel who were acting beyond the law and/or independently of the ‘government’, something difficult to assess but that for most activists was rather obvious (Figure 2).

As such, state rogue repression was common against activists that threatened the political survival or reputation of political authorities and state officials, for instance, cases of corruption, electoral fraud or linkages with business or criminal groups; or who pointed to the responsibility of authorities and security forces on criminal acts such as torture, disappearances and murder. Relevantly, the issue of publicity appears to be an important factor driving this form of repression: the reason it may be commonly employed against journalists who through their publications give an issue national or international visibility, as well as against political and environmental rights activists who publicize and reveal compromising information in order to mobilize outrage and support.²

Sampled activists received threats directly in personal encounters during rallies, meetings and so on, or clandestinely and indirectly, by phone, online or through so-called intermediaries. As explained by a Colombian activist:

The intellectual author gives the order, and the material author brings you the message. I couldn’t say to you outright that the biggest threat to me has been the mayor, because they have their own advisers who go and say ‘Look, so-and-so is talking too much.’ But the municipality, as an administration, has been a threat to me. And they sent someone after me. (C09)

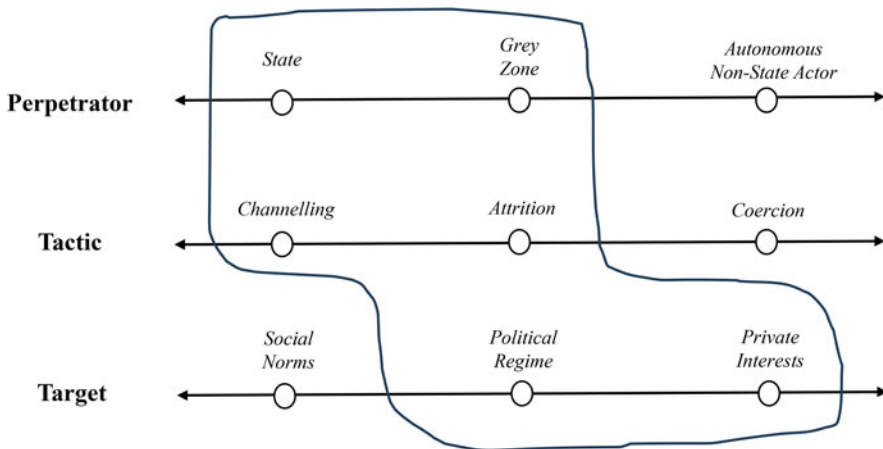


Figure 2. State Rogue Repression.

Low-ranking officials usually carried out intimidation and harassment themselves – mostly through verbal threats by phone or via social media, while higher-ranking officials were more prone to delegate repressive measures to more sophisticated agents, such as criminal actors or friendly judges. As mentioned, while intimidation is the most used tactic present in this pattern of repression, in a few incidences, higher state officials also employed criminalization and initiated fabricated judicial cases against activists, and police officials resorted to direct physical coercion – for instance, through temporary imprisonment. A Kenyan activist working on issues of political integrity and civil liberties recounted a typical incident:

In 2002 ... there had been a mayor elected in this town. The mayor is from the Somali origin and he was caught with guns from Somalia bringing them to Kenya. He was also a relative to the former PC [police commissioner] here ... so I took up the matter and went to court and said that we have a new Constitution under Chapter 6 that deals with issues in integrity and that that guy was not fit to be my mayor. We went to court. He hired a prominent lawyer and I also engaged a lawyer but after that I started receiving threats from some of his friends and relatives – people were being sent to my office to threaten me ... The threats were so serious I went to the police but it would seem [they] had also been bribed. I had to relocate ... until the case was heard and determined. (K01)

Importantly, while acts of state rogue repression were typically carried out or ordered by specific politicians or public officials (17% of interviewees mentioned individual politicians as perpetrators), our analysis indicates that these hybrid actions are generally part of broader ‘rogue cultures’ permeating the political system and state organizations, and enabling informal (and illicit) pockets within them (Sherman 2020; Trejo and Ley 2020).³ Accordingly, these acts of repression are rarely the deed of a few ‘rotten apples’ but rather a manifestation of broader institutional structures (and weaknesses), generally deeply rooted and resilient, which privilege particularistic linkages over public concerns and, accordingly, facilitate arbitrary law enforcement or extra-legal forms of coercion (Fahlberg 2023). This is the case of the Kenyan activist quoted above, who felt he could not count on protection from threats as a result of police corruption, or of an Egyptian women’s rights activist when trying to report police harassment: ‘he [the head of national security investigations] said that if I get out of here and report the policeman, they have a report ready about me. He raised the TV sound, and said the president is talking nowadays about terrorism, and you could be imprisoned for 15 years’ (E23). As a result of these enabling grey zones, the majority of our respondents did not even consider external accountability a possibility, while others that made accusations felt their cases were either delayed or distorted by political authorities through bribes and personal connections.

This enabling environment appears also to be highly shaped by the type of regime confronted. In more authoritarian contexts, such as in post-2013 Egypt, coercive institutions (and other social forces) are largely organized to protect the authority of the government rather than to guarantee human rights or the rule of law, as the following quote from an Egyptian activist aptly illustrates:

[N]ational security is for me an umbrella for groups that are not only threats but abusers, in a balance of power that I am not in an equal power with at all. They have a capacity to dig deep in personal lives, get information, pictures, abuse, threat, impose, falsify information, basically end someone’s life without control, and under them there are a lot of groups that follow the same dynamic. ... Different lines of police officers, small informants, again they just do it because they are part of the system, drug dealers, every person with different levels of intention and access to power that is part of that structure. I would say that the justice system in Egypt is for me again a very inter-laid structure of power, with no exception ... (E09)

As a result, rogue and ‘extra-legal’ repression is often hard to disentangle from official yet clandestine decisions by higher political authorities, particularly in environments where well-organized groups are available that can be co-opted to mobilize repressive resources.

Corporate repression

Corporate repression points to the engagement of private enterprises in suppressing activism that threatens their interests – for instance, by raising awareness on the detrimental environmental, cultural and health impacts of businesses, documenting the erosion of local conditions and livelihoods, and organizing local communities to defend their rights (Figure 3).

In our sample, the 13 activists who experienced corporate repression were mostly involved in environmental, land and/or indigenous rights issues, representing local communities or groups (farmers, indigenous people) affected by large land-based projects such as agribusiness, mining and energy. These activists mainly operated at the grassroots level, had limited access to formal organizational resources and were located in rural areas where ‘the extraction industry starts to

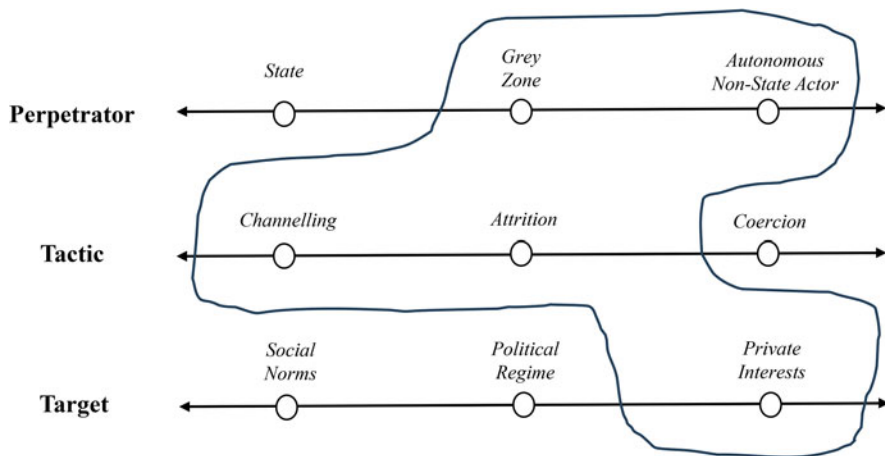


Figure 3. Corporate Repression.

act like a small state entity itself⁹ and maintained close links with legal or illegal armed actors (C16).

In our sample, this form of repression included direct threats against activists or their families in conjunction with defamation campaigns and attempts to co-opt more moderate or vulnerable parts of the local community, as experienced by a Mexican indigenous rights activist:

We confronted intimidations and ... rumours as well as the dissemination of lies ... for example in assemblies ... someone from an enterprise went close to a colleague, her picture was taken and at the next weekly assembly a photo of my colleague with this person [responding to private interests] was presented, rumours were disseminated about her, that she 'sell' the movement, that she accepted money ... this was not true ... but this is the other type [of attack] ... a kind of slander ... the next month after I was detained, the Facebook accounts of all the members of my organization got broken into, on the very same week. (M06)

In addition, many activists described violent repression, including assassinations, launched against colleagues and prominent movement figures, and around 30% experienced direct physical assaults. This is in line with existing evidence, with Front Line Defenders (2023: 9) identifying environmental, land and indigenous rights activists as the most threatened sector of human rights activism, accounting for 48% of worldwide killings in 2022.⁴

As with the previous pattern, while corporate actors may be the primary sponsor, this does not mean they acted alone – as a matter of fact, in our data, 90% of mentions of corporate perpetrators came in tandem with other actors. This could be expected, given that when activists target a business or economic sector, they generally do it as part of a broader challenge against institutional failures, policy decisions or the complicit activities of state agents. As a result, these activists often encountered powerful political–business alliances plotting against them, with security services involved in the dispersion of occupations and marches, and authorities persecuting activists and stigmatizing them in the eyes of the wider population. Therefore, the standard *modus operandi* of corporate repression appears to be highly mediated and grey, with firms relying on proxies such as private security guards (often former army and police officials) or local non-state armed groups, which may be orchestrated by an influential intermediary, such as a local politician or chief of police – suggesting potential overlaps with the previous pattern. These alliances allow a certain vicious complementarity, where business provides economic resources and other actors mobilize coercive or attritional ones. A Colombian labour rights activist provided insight into this logic:

... when multinationals threaten you, they don't do it openly. ... For instance, the judges that determine displacement cases related to multinationals often have links to other authorities also tied to multinational interests. ... It's difficult to find an independent judge. The logic here in Colombia is that you are guilty unless you can prove yourself innocent. So people are very afraid when they have to go in front of a judge. (C32)

Similarly, as large (and foreign) corporations commonly enjoy influential ties with government and law enforcement officials, their actions were often described as highly clouded, hiding behind several layers of responsibility that activists saw as impossible to unpack and challenge: ‘Behind this are large-scale interests; if not the departmental governor, then the local public service company’ (C27). Consequently, activists rarely denounced these acts and tended to concentrate their efforts in gaining support from supportive elites or larger advocacy groups who could launch legal proceedings against companies or threaten them with severe reputational costs. Furthermore, some expected that public visibility and court documentations would provide them with additional security, as companies as well as state authorities would be more hesitant in targeting visible cases – though this is far from guaranteed, as the assassination of Dom Phillips and Bruno Pereira in Brazil in 2022 by members of a transnational illegal fishing network tragically demonstrates.

Communitarian repression

Communitarian repression describes acts of silencing dissent carried out by individuals or groups that are part of the communities where activists live or work – with 29% of our interviewees mentioning community actors as perpetrators. Typical cases included activists who deal with concrete cases of human rights violations, such as child abuse, gender-based violence and violations of religious freedom, and those who do local advocacy on these topics or the rights of marginalized groups (Figure 4).

The type of communal perpetrators can vary, including family groups, agitated neighbours, community associations and religious or tribal authorities, who move to intimidate, assault, harass or try to force activists to vacate the territory, as they see human rights activism clashing with dominant norms and hierarchies regulating local orders. Accordingly, incidences of community repression tended ‘to obey moral imperatives’ and were structured in terms of ‘appropriate punishments’ of

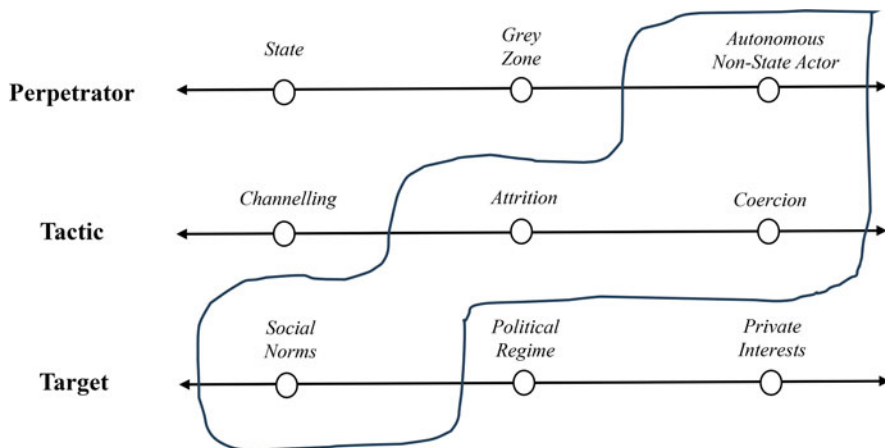


Figure 4. Communitarian Repression.

those violating existing cultural traditions (Pratten 2008: 7). Less frequently, we found cases where activism was decoded by members of the community as taking a side in a major cleavage of conflict in society, be this political, ethnic or religious – with activists being accused of sponsoring foreign (Western) values or of supporting insurgent or anti-national forces.

In our data, women’s and children’s rights activists and LGBTQI+ activists were by far the most affected types, something to be expected as their activities clashed rather directly with entrenched gender norms, traditional practices and associated power relations. Hence, these activists often faced repression from the families of those they tried to support and/or protect, such as in the case of the following Egyptian activist working on sexual rights:

There was one incident where I was working with this girl whose parents did not know about her sexuality, and they [found out] about her meetings with us. Her mother sent me threatening messages saying that the girl’s father worked in the National Security and that she can tell him about me. I know their family and they are a powerful one with lots of connections. (E18)

Relevantly, communitarian repression is not simply directed against activists for what they do but also for whom they are (Nah et al. 2013), something that was particularly salient in relation to LGBTQI+ activists, who often had a gender non-conforming identity themselves which is heavily stigmatized in their countries. The experience of a Kenyan activist provides a brutal illustration of the risks associated with LGBTQI+ activism:

We were going to sensitize the health workers and religious leaders on LGBTI issues. ... I was advocating for HIV rates to come down, and also against violence against key populations: LGBTQ, FSWs [female sex workers] and MSWs [male sex workers] those were most at risk in terms of HIV. ... I also wanted to discuss the violence, [as] they are attacked by clients, community, people had been beaten to death, ejected from houses. When the media came, they put it up everywhere. So, now, [anonymized organization] had to evacuate me immediately. ... I was thrown out from my house by my landlord, even my neighbours told me that maybe I would rape their children. ... My parents called me and asked me if I had to advertise myself on the media, they disowned me and told me for them I was dead. (K34)

Most occurrences of communitarian repression seem autonomous – only in rare cases our respondents reported that state authorities directly instigated and/or supported communal threats and violence. For instance, a few activists in Egypt pointed to the actions of ‘honourable citizens’ (*muwāṭinūn shurafāʾ*), individuals who defend the national values projected by the government, in disrupting protests, infiltrating events and voluntarily reporting dissidence to the security forces (see also Abdelhamid 2024).

This is not to suggest, however, that communitarian repression does not benefit from grey-zone complementarities. Indeed, as ample evidence shows, levels of communal violence to a large extent depend on whether the state indirectly legitimizes

its use, for example, through stigmatizing discourses, patchy rule of law or pervasive cultures of impunity (Auyero 2007; Brass 2016). Political authorities can thus indirectly promote communitarian repression by turning a blind eye to certain types of assaults, such as the harassment of LGBTQI+ and sex workers' rights activists, or by deliberately fostering polarization among the citizenry. The massive state crackdown on the activist community in post-revolutionary Egypt, for instance, created a political climate where political dissidents were presented as traitors by the government and the media, legitimizing violent opposition against them (Shahin 2012: 344). The following quote by an Egyptian activist illustrates this:

In 2013 I was going to [district] in Cairo to meet with a Sheikh who was accused of distributing booklets on the Islamic Caliphate During my talk with them they asked me whom do I work for. Now I think that I should have told them journalist or something because once I told them I work in human rights they got very aggressive and started accusing me of being a traitor that I had to leave right away before being physically assaulted. (E08)

Our evidence hence indicates a highly ambivalent role of political authorities and police forces in relation to communitarian repression. While in a few cases, the police intervened to protect activists and hold perpetrators accountable, far more frequently, the security forces sought to mediate between the parties, often blaming activists for 'unnecessarily' stirring conflict and tensions.

Non-state armed repression

Experienced by 25% of activists in the sample, this last pattern denotes acts of repression conducted by armed non-state actors who see their private interests affected by the actions of activists. In our data, non-state armed repression evidences predominantly in Colombia (mentioned by 56% of activists) and Mexico (by 40%), due to the presence of highly organized violent groups such as drug cartels, guerillas and paramilitaries, which enjoy significant territorial presence and political and social influence (Figure 5).

We encountered three expressions of this form of repression. The first was directed against activists, including lawyers and journalists, who investigated large-scale illicit activities, such as drug or human trafficking networks, as well as high-level political killings, involving organized crime groups in collusion with local state authorities:

I lead paradigmatic cases ... disappearances, the case of [anonymized]. ... [A]fter her killing I have been accompanied by bodyguards, I have been in shelters because of direct threats against me Currently, I am travelling a lot to the mountains, organized crime has a prominent position in there; sometimes I receive phone calls and there are conversations of people talking about how am I to be killed and so on, ... here in the city nothing will happen to me, because mafias are controlled by authorities, but in the mountains, I could face major consequences, this is true even for prosecutors. For example, I was working in a case with a prosecutor, she was disappeared, I am sure it was for our case. (M26)

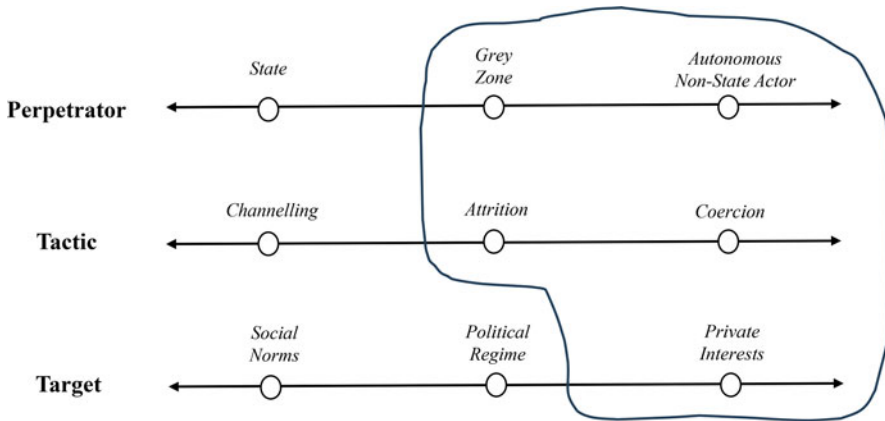


Figure 5. Non-State Armed Repression.

The second expression involved activists who worked (and generally lived) in rural areas or urban neighbourhoods under the relative control of this type of actors, and who encountered them routinely as part of their activities. These activists did not challenge non-state armed actors directly but faced repression nonetheless as they indirectly interfered with their interests, for instance, by advocating drug prevention, supporting displaced or marginalized communities, or mediating on issues such as land disputes:

I went to mediate a community where there was a conflict between two groups of people ... there had been deaths due to land issues. The caciques [gang chiefs] had used the police to go into the community and remove the indigenous population. This caused mass killing. I did not realize when mediating that behind this conflict were the caciques of the region. They even told me to leave because something was going to happen to me. I thought the worst things at that moment. I was very scared. (M29)

The third manifestation was more ‘casual’ and involved extortion, robbing, kidnapping and assaults on activists by local gangs, militias and paramilitaries, characterizing a grey space found in many Global South contexts where the boundary between organized interests and everyday criminality is particularly fluid. As a result it was often unclear to activists themselves if they were threatened due to their activism or just the result of living in what Ana Villarreal (2021: 228) refers to as ‘dangerous worlds’ – the assimilated contexts of high violence, impunity and vulnerability often found in many cities in Latin America and other regions.

The tactics used by non-state armed perpetrators were the most overtly violent of the four patterns, ranging from death threats to serious physical attacks, including murders, disappearances, kidnappings, break-ins and rape. This we connect with their history and (routine) experience in the use of coercion, and with their capacity to penetrate or confront state institutions, which in many cases makes

them feel ‘untouchable’ (M25). Thus, while guerrillas (in Colombia) repress largely autonomously from the state, paramilitaries, militias and criminal groups can enjoy informal and clandestine connections with local state authorities and have informants in state agencies and security forces. Moreover, a context of protracted political violence also means that paramilitary forces and state security agencies may develop a strong ‘politico-ideological correspondence’ (C40) where the former continue the ‘dirty work historically undertaken by the state military’ (Hunt 2009: 68), with activists noting this as ‘a collusion of actors that is not easy to disentangle’ (M30).

However, contrary to the first and second patterns, the arrow of complementarity here inverts, with state actors functioning as rogue proxies for the protection of non-state principals, or patrolling the bounded territorial orders where these operate. For our interviewees, this taken-for-granted collusion and constant sense of impunity aggravated the threat of non-state armed repression and the jurisdictional authority these actors projected over certain issues or areas, which in many cases was recognized by official agents: when a Kenyan activist working on land-grabbing wanted to report an assault by a local gang, he was asked by the police if he ‘could afford to deal with the gang, and warned me not to touch the damn issue’ (K1).

Conclusion

The experiences of repression of human rights activists this article explores validate the notion that hybrid repression, far from an exceptional or peripheral occurrence, is actually a rather common and routine feature present in diverse social and political orders. Moreover, our article offers a concise analytical framework to evaluate different patterns while evidencing and elaborating the distinctiveness of four concrete manifestations.

On this basis, the article makes a series of contributions to the literature of contentious politics, repression and conflict studies. First, it challenges restrictive conceptions of repression as a sort of direct, strategic and highly coordinated endeavour led by an integrated and homogeneous state. The different patterns explored, which as mentioned, are not presumed to comprise a complete set, reveal different degrees of coordination and articulation between state and non-state actors. These linkages range from more aligned and open configurations, where actors conspire and act in concert, to more collateral and surreptitious ones where either state and non-state actors act clandestinely or exploit propitious social and political opportunities (and gaps), from political polarization and crime to the social (and political) stigmatization of certain groups. While these grey-zone arrangements are considered to be more typical in middle-zone countries of the Global South, the growing presence and influence of corporate and community actors in opposing activist groups and movements in a broader range of countries (for instance, against pro-Palestine protests in the US and Germany) questions this premise, raising the empirical puzzle of how hybridity may manifest in supposedly high-capacity regimes and consolidated democratic environments.

Second, our argument makes clear the logic of hybrid repression is conditioned by the manner in which political conditions, sociocultural contexts and arenas of

human rights activism intersect. Indeed, our data suggest that certain forms of hybrid repression are more prevalent in certain countries than others, and more commonly experienced by certain types of human rights activists than others. Hence, while this article did not prioritize a national-comparative line of inquiry, we noted that communitarian repression appears to be more common in countries such as Kenya than in those such as Egypt, where the state, and particularly the security services, tend to command greater influence over society. Similarly, the Colombian and Mexican contexts seem to grant greater opportunities for state rogue and non-state armed arrangements, either by armed groups or local political figures acting on their own, or by state and non-state actors complementing each other in different ways. Evidence in the literature indicates that other hybrid configurations emerge in countries crossed by other types of conflict, ethno-sectarian differences or tribal divides (Voller 2023). As such, our findings call for further case-study and comparative analyses seeking to uncover other relevant patterns of hybrid repression, such as when activists turn against other activists, as well as to better understand how different regime and social conditions may allow hybrid repression to flourish, the distinct forms hybrid repression could take in societies marked by different social, political and conflict cleavages, and the mutual effects state-led and hybrid repression may have on each other and on the evolution of contentious action.

The final issue points to perhaps the least-understood dimension: the manner in which hybrid repression impacts on activism and activists. We consider this aspect highlights a pressing line of investigation, as the more diffused and ubiquitous character hybrid repression may assume in certain contexts – where activists do not know precisely who is targeting them and in which arenas they can be safe – and the social and emotional effects this uncertainty and insecurity induce, can be a highly damaging and effective mechanism of dissent control. Understanding how activists experience and deal with the different patterns of repression they confront is thus key to illuminate the actual efforts individual and groups make to remain mobilized and motivated, to understand when and how they fail to do so, and, in more policy-related terms, to devise more appropriate ways to assist and protect them.

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Ethical statement. This article analyses data from the research project ‘Navigating Risk, Managing Security, and Receiving Support: The Experiences of Human Rights Defenders in Colombia, Mexico, Kenya, Egypt, and Indonesia’ (<https://securityofdefendersproject.org/>) led by Dr Alice M. Nah, with ethics approval from the Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology Ethics Committee at the University of York, UK. Participants gave informed consent to participate and for the research findings to be published.

Notes

1 The term ‘repression’ is used differently across different types of literatures. Here, we conceptualize repression as state or non-state action aimed at preventing, constraining and suppressing non-institutional challenges to social and political power (see Earl 2011). Political repression, as we understand it, thus differs from broader but related concepts, such as political control, that refer to the broad range of measures governments use to ensure compliance by social actors (e.g. Hassan et al. 2022).

- 2 Our sample includes seven activists who worked as journalists on different issues (four on civil and political rights, two on women's and children rights, and one on land and indigenous rights). All of them saw themselves as human rights activists and most collaborated with or had worked in human rights organizations.
- 3 For this reason, the autonomy of the security forces is more difficult to assess, as interviewees were often unsure about who the actual principal was.
- 4 Front Line Defenders is an international human rights organization mapping risks against human rights activists and promoting protective measures.

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