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## Comparative Political Studies

### Signals of Support from Great Power Patrons and the Use of Repression during Nonviolent Protests

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Manuscript ID	CPS-17-0611.R2
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	Human Rights, Democratization and Regime Change, Non-Democratic Regimes, Intergovernmental Relations
Abstract:	<p>When autocrats face threats of non-violent mass mobilization, they are likely to respond with repression. However, when will the autocrat initiate, step up, or downscale repressive behavior during such protest events? We propose that signals of support from great power patrons play a pivotal role in emboldening rulers to engage in and intensify repressive behavior. To probe this hypothesis, we analyze how supportive and non-supportive actions and statements of the great powers in the United Nations Security Council shape the repressive behavior of authoritarian regimes during three recent, and similar, cases of protest events: Burma 2007, Zimbabwe 2008, and Burkina Faso 2014. The cases show that the more unequivocal and consistent patron support for the besieged regime is the firmer and more violent are the responses to the domestic challengers.</p>

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## Introduction

When autocrats are challenged by mass protests, they are likely to use violence in order to protect their power (Krain, 2012; Murdie & Davis, 2012; see., e.g., Wood, 2008). However, the use of large-scale coercion is a potentially costly and risky strategy; repression may backfire (Martin, 2007; Nepstad, 2013), lead to international shaming and sanctioning (DeMeritt, 2012; Krain, 2012; Murdie & Davis, 2012) and trigger defection among elites and the rank and file (Bellin, 2012). What further complicates such situations is that information about these risks is often scarce and unreliable. Consequently, rulers and their coercive agents will base their decisions concerning the use of repression on those bits of information that are readily available to them and that tell them something about the relative strength and determination of the opposing sides (Weyland, 2009).

In this paper, we focus on those cues of information that domestic actors receive from abroad. We argue that the decision and ability to apply and effectually carry out substantive violence against protesters is affected by signals sent from the most powerful states of the international arena. The main hypothesis is that authoritarian regimes will be more prone to meet demonstrators with brute force in the first place, and they will be more likely to step up violence over the course of a longer-lasting protest event, if they receive credible signals of support from a great power patron. When a supportive signal is sent from a powerful patron it triggers inferential shortcuts among relevant actors in both the regime and the opposition; emboldening autocrats and their coercive agents to stand firmer and fight back to preserve power and dissuading opposition actors. On the contrary, the absence, or wavering, of such a supportive patron triggers the opposite – the weakening of the dictator’s resolve and his control over his coercive apparatus and the strengthening of those that mobilize against him. Thus, we expect that dictators intensify or minimize repression against their challengers in accordance with the character of signals they receive from powerful actors from the outside.

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4           Though political scientists increasingly look to international factors when trying to  
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6 explain political phenomena at the domestic level, this proposition has not been thoroughly  
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8 theorized nor systematically scrutinized empirically. Among students of regime change and  
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10 democratization, a whole sub-literature has recently emerged that analyzes how external actors  
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12 undergird and bolster authoritarian regimes (Ambrosio, 2014; Tansey, 2016; Tolstrup, 2015). Also  
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14 in the literature on state repression, several studies point to external factors when accounting for  
15  
16 cross-national patterns of coercion (DeMeritt, 2012; Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui, 2005; Krain, 2012).  
17  
18 However, neither of the two has systematically addressed the relation between third party signals to  
19  
20 autocrats and their repressive behavior during mass protests. But if external powers may indeed  
21  
22 induce governments to apply coercion through signals of support we must pay more attention to  
23  
24 these if we want to understand when (*timing*) and how (*intensity*) coercion is used during periods  
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26 with mass protests.  
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31           To probe our proposition empirically, we set up a comparative case study guided by a  
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33 most similar system design logic. Across three cases of nonviolent protest events in entrenched  
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35 autocracies, we analyze how actions and statements of the most powerful actors in the international  
36  
37 arena – the permanent members in the United Nations Security Council (UN SC) – shape the  
38  
39 propensity and ability of the incumbent regime to apply coercion. More specifically, we compare  
40  
41 two positive cases of varying degrees of patron support (Burma 2007 and Zimbabwe 2008) and one  
42  
43 negative case, in which support is withdrawn as domestic instability grows (Burkina Faso 2014).  
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45 The case studies show that both the initiation of repression and the later intensification or reduction  
46  
47 of it fluctuate with the character of the signals received from the great powers of the UN SC.  
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52           The paper proceeds as follows. First, we discuss how mass uprisings challenge  
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54 authoritarian rule and how incumbents face constraints on their ability to respond to this challenge  
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56 with repression. Second, we explain how signals of support from external patrons can help the  
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4 autocrat overcome some of these constraints, thus facilitating the use of repressive campaigns.

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6 Finally, we discuss issues connected to our research design and then analyze each of the three cases  
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8  
9 in turn.

### 10 11 12 13 **When autocrats face mass uprisings**

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16 The use of nonviolent mass protests is becoming increasingly common and frequently result in the  
17  
18 unseating of autocrats around the world (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Kendall–Taylor & Frantz,  
19  
20 2014).<sup>1</sup> Occasionally, dictatorships are toppled when demonstrators seize power directly, forcefully  
21  
22 ousting the ruler and government officials from their offices and taking control of key institutions.  
23  
24 However, more likely is it that persistent protests destabilize authoritarian leaders indirectly by  
25  
26 causing splits in the ruling coalition. Either elite supporters and members of the coercive apparatus  
27  
28 defect to the opposition, or powerful insiders seek to make use of the moment and challenge the  
29  
30 autocrat themselves (Celestino & Gleditsch, 2013, pp. 387–389). Thus, when dictators face massive  
31  
32 protests they are forced to react if they want to preserve power.  
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37  
38 Most often, mass protests cannot be appeased through cooptation measures alone  
39  
40 (Frantz & Kendall-Taylor, 2014) or by waiting out the unrest. Dictators therefore frequently resort  
41  
42 to repression (Celestino & Gleditsch, 2013, p. 390; Davenport, 2007a); what Davenport (2007b, p.  
43  
44 7) terms the “law of coercive responsiveness.” An abundance of studies have analyzed the structural  
45  
46 factors that affect average levels of state repression between countries (for a recent overview, see  
47  
48 Hill & Jones, 2014), but we know very little about the “event-by-event sequences” that facilitate the  
49  
50 use of repression and affect the intensity with which it is applied (Shellman, 2006, pp. 564–565).  
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57 <sup>1</sup> In principle, our argument is also applicable to more violent forms of mass mobilizations. However, as the work of  
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59 Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) vividly illustrates, nonviolent protest campaigns are often characterized by different  
60 dynamics than violent ones. To keep our theoretical argument as clear as possible and to make for a stronger empirical  
analysis, we restrict ourselves to nonviolent mass protests.

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4 This also applies the nonviolent mass protests under investigation here. We know surprisingly little  
5  
6 about when during a protest event dictators are inclined to launch, step up, or decrease repression  
7  
8 against demonstrators.  
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11 From recent studies, we have learned that past experience with the use of large-scale  
12  
13 violence solidifies the ruling coalition in times of crisis (Levitsky & Way, 2010) and makes it more  
14  
15 likely that repression will be applied once again (Carey, 2010). Several studies also point to the size  
16  
17 and character of the ruling coalition as an important determinant of how core elite supporters  
18  
19 perceive their chances of retaining political influence after a regime transition and, thus, of how  
20  
21 reluctant they will be to engage in costly repressive activities (Geddes, 1999). For example,  
22  
23 Ulfelder (2005) shows that the narrow coalitions of personalist dictatorships are more likely to  
24  
25 “circle the wagons” when threatened by the masses. Similarly, Bellin (2012), in her study of the  
26  
27 autocracies of the Middle East, finds that the core of the coercive apparatus is more likely to employ  
28  
29 repression when they belong to a ruling minority group or have entrenched interests in the survival  
30  
31 of the regime (see also Barany, 2013; Nepstad, 2013). Thus, characteristics of the incumbent regime  
32  
33 clearly shape its average propensity to use violence when challenged by the masses. Still, we often  
34  
35 see immense variation in the coercive responses of otherwise similar regimes and even within the  
36  
37 same regime across a single protest event. The timing, the intensity, the steadfastness, and the  
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39 success of coercive responses can vary a lot. Thus, there is clearly something missing in our  
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41 understanding of how dissent and repression should be modelled.  
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48 Recently, a number of studies have pointed to the fact that important dynamics at the  
49  
50 international level may be at play. Within the state repression literature, it has been shown that  
51  
52 naming and shaming practices from human rights NGOs and international organizations (DeMeritt,  
53  
54 2012; Krain, 2012, 2014; Murdie & Davis, 2012) and dependency on foreign direct investments  
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56 (Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui, 2005; Richards, Gelleny, & Sacko, 2001) can dissuade the use of  
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4 repression. In this body of literature, many of the actions by the international community meant to  
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6 restrain and pressure authoritarian rulers have been analyzed, but less attention is paid to those that  
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8 might spur and facilitate the use of coercion. However, as a recent formal modelling study shows  
9  
10 (Chyzh & Labzina, Forthcoming) and a proliferating literature on the international dimension of  
11  
12 authoritarianism indicates, third parties may be very important in this regard. For example, a  
13  
14 number of studies have documented how dictators look to international partners, now frequently  
15  
16 referred to as “black knights” or “autocracy promoters,” for diplomatic and material support when  
17  
18 trying to bolster their rule and deal with domestic challengers (Ambrosio, 2014; Tolstrup, 2015).  
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20  
21 But also in this tradition, the question of third-party influence on the onset and subsequent  
22  
23 development of repressive campaigns in connection with nonviolent anti-regime protests has so far  
24  
25 not been systematically scrutinized across cases nor specified theoretically. Without this perspective  
26  
27 of an external push factor, we risk overlooking important aspects of how decisions concerning the  
28  
29 use of repression are formed and carried out.  
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### 36 **Powerful patrons and signals of support as drivers of repression**

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38 The use of repression can be thought of as a two-stage process. First, the autocrat must decide to opt  
39  
40 for a coercive response. Second, the security forces choose whether to comply. As mass protest  
41  
42 often protract for days, weeks, and even months, and as coercion need not serve its purpose  
43  
44 immediately, the incumbent regime is forced to go through this process several times during a  
45  
46 period with uprisings. At both stages, the relevant actors will often vacillate due to two factors: i)  
47  
48 they know that the use of repression can be a risky strategy; and, ii) they often lack information to  
49  
50 adequately assess the magnitude of those risks.  
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54  
55 Most importantly, the employment of large-scale coercion against peaceful protesters  
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57 can backfire in a number of ways. It may anger and defy active protesters and even spur hitherto  
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4 passive supporters to also take to the streets (Escribà-Folch, 2013; Martin, 2007; Nepstad, 2013).  
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6 Coercion against civilians is also likely to attract the attention of the international community,  
7  
8 adding mounting external pressure to an already unstable domestic situation (DeMeritt, 2012;  
9  
10 Krain, 2012; Murdie & Davis, 2012). Lastly, it is possible that the onset of popular protest itself and  
11  
12 the order to use excessive repression against it trigger splits within the regime itself. When leaders  
13  
14 as well as the rank and file of the coercive apparatus start to question the cohesion of the regime,  
15  
16 uncertainty can spread like a wildfire, and it becomes increasingly probable that critical parts of the  
17  
18 military refuse to follow orders (Bellin, 2012; Celestino & Gleditsch, 2013, p. 390).  
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23         What further complicates this process is the fact that assessments of these risks are  
24  
25 often based on imperfect information (Pierskalla, 2010). Neither dictators nor agents of the coercive  
26  
27 apparatus know for certain how domestic opponents, international actors, and regime insiders will  
28  
29 react to a coercive campaign. According to Weyland (2009, pp. 400–402), this makes actors  
30  
31 vulnerable to heuristic shortcuts. In heated situations such as mass uprisings, opposition and regime  
32  
33 actors alike will be prone to overestimate the importance of recently emerged information that help  
34  
35 them assess the relative strength and determination of the opposing sides. Consequently, we should  
36  
37 expect cues of information that picture the regime as strong and cohesive to help alleviate the  
38  
39 concerns with employing coercion that both dictator and coercive agents have. Contrariwise, cues  
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41 of information that portray the incumbent regime as fragile and its opponents as unstoppable are  
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43 likely to amplify those concerns.  
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48         Information cues that affect the behavior of domestic actors during uprisings may  
49  
50 emerge from both within and outside a country's borders (Weyland, 2009, 2016). Consequently, we  
51  
52 hypothesize that signals sent from great powers during protest events can work as important  
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54 information cues that these actors use to evaluate the strength of the incumbent regime. Great  
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56 powers are those actors in the international arena that are most prone to and capable of influencing  
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4 events on the ground in countries around the world. When they issue statements or carry out actions  
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6 in connection with events in a country, they send observable signals that actors in other states use to  
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8 estimate the position and the intentions of the great power (Fearon, 1994; Trager, 2015). When  
9  
10 mass demonstrations unfold, we should therefore expect regime and opposition actors to pay careful  
11  
12 attention to the words and actions of great powers (cf., Thyne, 2006). Through the interpretation of  
13  
14 these signals they establish a sense of the “degree of permissiveness” of the international context  
15  
16 (Krain, 2012, p. 576). In particular, we should expect attention to be directed towards those great  
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18 powers that have stood up for the incumbent autocracy in the past. We term these *great power*  
19  
20 *patrons*.  
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### 27 *Mechanisms*

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29 We propose three mechanisms through which supportive signals from great power patrons may  
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31 affect decisions to employ and intensify repressive campaigns in authoritarian regimes challenged  
32  
33 by mass protests. The first one operates on both the autocrat and his coercive agents, the second  
34  
35 mechanism affects regime actors indirectly through the actions of the opposition, and the third  
36  
37 works on the dictator alone.  
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41 First, a signal of support may indicate that the international actor will provide  
42  
43 additional backing to the regime in the near future, if necessary. For the ruler and his supporters, the  
44  
45 promise of future provisions of political, economic, or military support is reassuring in case the  
46  
47 standoff with the domestic challengers intensifies or drags out. A supportive signal makes it clear  
48  
49 that the regime’s longer-term capability to repress and distribute rents will not be crippled because  
50  
51 of a lack of resources. In addition, a signal of support gives domestic actors indications of the  
52  
53 degree to which the sender is willing to stand up against other international actors seeking to  
54  
55 condemn and penalize repression through the use of political and economic sanctions (cf., Early,  
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4 2011). In both scenarios, the probability of defection from regime ranks is lowered; ruling coalition  
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6 members will be less likely to fear that the regime will crumble because of economic hardship or  
7  
8 international isolation, and coercive agents will feel that they have been shielded against naming  
9  
10 and shaming practices and potential legal punishment.  
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13           Second, supportive signals may dissuade and cripple the mobilized anti-regime forces.  
14  
15 For mass mobilizations to succeed, a sense of invulnerability among demonstrators is crucial; they  
16  
17 must believe that victory is within reach (see, e.g., Ginkel & Smith, 1999, pp. 293, 301). Signs that  
18  
19 indicate that the regime is weakened will boost such feelings among the opposition and improve its  
20  
21 ability to sustain and increase participation in the anti-regime campaign (Chenoweth & Stephan,  
22  
23 2011; Schock, 2013, p. 283). Signals of outside support to the regime do the exact opposite; they  
24  
25 leave the opposition and those sympathizing with it with the impression that they now face a  
26  
27 stronger, more enduring, and perhaps even emboldened, opponent. This will make it more difficult  
28  
29 for the opposition to continue and escalate their fight (cf., Pierskalla, 2010, p. 123). Convincing  
30  
31 passive supporters to join the mobilization and active supporters to stay engaged and continue their  
32  
33 resistance is more difficult in the light of such dissuading information. Contrariwise, for regime  
34  
35 supporters and coercive agents, the opposition's inability to escalate the conflict is interpreted as a  
36  
37 reassuring sign of weakness. They will consequently feel more certain that repression will be an  
38  
39 effective tool for quelling the uprisings, and perhaps even see this as a window of opportunity to  
40  
41 root out the opposition once and for all. Thus, initiating and upscaling a repressive campaign  
42  
43 against regime challengers who are losing momentum and faith in immediate victory will be  
44  
45 perceived as an attractive, risk-free strategy likely to generate significant benefits to the regime.  
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52           Finally, some supportive signals are meant for the dictator alone and can be  
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54 interpreted as a security guarantee for his personal safety should the regime fall. Outgoing dictators  
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56 may suffer terrible post-tenure fates (Goemans, 2008) and will therefore be wary to accept  
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4 negotiated transfers of power unless their challengers, or others, can offer them credible guarantees  
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6 of protection. As the opposition is rarely in a position to do this, exile will often be the only  
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8 peaceful solution to this dilemma (Escriba-Folch & Krcmaric, 2017). A signal of support from a  
9  
10 great-power patron may thus reassure the ruler that with the help of the patron, he will be able to  
11  
12 find a safe haven abroad. Such an exit option will initially make the dictator more prone to gamble  
13  
14 as the costs connected to an unsuccessful use of repression are lowered. With nothing to lose, he  
15  
16 will likely respond to the first popular mobilization by ordering repression – even when he is  
17  
18 uncertain that it will indeed serve its purpose and secure his power. However, if subsequently the  
19  
20 situation worsens, a credible exit option is likely to operate in the exact opposite direction. This may  
21  
22 happen if protests in spite of the initial use of repression continue to swirl or become more  
23  
24 threatening in character, or if divides within the regime itself deepens. In such scenarios, the ruler  
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26 will hardly risk his life and well-being by clinging to power at all costs and will therefore be more  
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28 open to abort the coercive strategy altogether.  
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34           Recapitulating, signals of support are likely to harden the resolve of the dictator,  
35  
36 minimize uncertainty among members of the ruling coalition and the coercive apparatus, and  
37  
38 dissuade opposition actors and their supporters. With signs of protection, rulers will be more likely  
39  
40 to order and step up repressive campaigns, core supporters will be less likely to defect, and coercive  
41  
42 agents will be more willing to carry out and intensify repression. Only when rulers interpret signals  
43  
44 of support as a personal security guarantee, and only when the mobilization against the incumbent  
45  
46 persists and support for him within his coalition declines, will patron signals of support have a  
47  
48 suppressing effect on the use of repression.  
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## 54 **Design**

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4 Even though cross-sectional time-series data on protest events and aggregated measures of the use  
5  
6 of repression do exist, they do not allow us to tease out how interactions between international and  
7  
8 domestic actors develop across a particular event and how this affects changes in coercive behavior  
9  
10 on the ground. To understand these processes, we need case studies. In what follows, we conduct a  
11  
12 comparative case study guided by a most similar system design logic (see, e.g., Lijphart, 1971).

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15 Across three cases we analyze how signals of support from great powers in the UN Security  
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17 Council (UN SC) affect the use of regime-sponsored repression when autocrats face challenges to  
18  
19 their power in the form of persistent, large-scale, predominately peaceful protests: Burma under the  
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21 Saffron Revolution in 2007, Zimbabwe during the popular unrests connected to the heated  
22  
23 parliamentary and presidential elections in 2008, and Burkina Faso during the Burkinabé uprisings  
24  
25 in late 2014.  
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### 31 *Patron signals of support*

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33 We know that signals from international actors will only affect the ways domestic actors think and  
34  
35 behave if they are observable to them and deemed credible (see, e.g., Trager, 2015). We therefore  
36  
37 restrict the analysis to a special kind of patron signals that we expect to have equally high visibility  
38  
39 and high credibility across different cases: those issued by the five great powers in the UN SC  
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41 during or in immediate connection with SC meetings. When great powers issue statements in  
42  
43 connection with UN SC meetings on a particular issue, they openly commit themselves to a certain  
44  
45 position from which backtracking can be quite costly. And when they make use of veto powers and  
46  
47 other obstructive actions (which we discuss below) they risk incurring substantial international  
48  
49 reputational costs (see, e.g., Fearon, 1994; Thyne, 2006, pp. 939–940). If the patron stands up for  
50  
51 the regime in the Council even when the whole world is watching and perhaps even when other  
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4 powerful international actors push for applying pressure, then it probably means business and the  
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6 signals it sends can therefore be interpreted as credible.  
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9           So what kind of actions by the permanent members of the UN SC should count as  
10  
11 supportive signals? Primarily, we discriminate between two types. One is endorsing statements  
12  
13 issued shortly before, under, or after UN SC meetings. The general character of the statements  
14  
15 indicate whether the patron will be likely to stand up for the challenged regime, and the wording  
16  
17 used indicate the determination with which the patron approaches the issue. The other way to send  
18  
19 signals of support is through obstructive actions made in connection with Council meetings.  
20  
21 Permanent members may either formally or informally use their veto powers to block any Security  
22  
23 Council action. The strongest signal is when patrons fight vehemently to keep a case off the agenda  
24  
25 in the first place and thus effectively inhibit further actions.<sup>2</sup> If a case reaches the agenda even in  
26  
27 spite of objections from a permanent member, that state may still formally or informally use its veto  
28  
29 power to block Security Council actions in the form of presidential statements or resolutions. And  
30  
31 even if decisions are adopted, great power patrons can show their support by demanding that the  
32  
33 negative wordings of statements are toned down or scrapped from the final text entirely, by taking  
34  
35 the worst bite off economic sanctions (cf., Early, 2011), or by making mandates for military  
36  
37 interventions as weak as possible (Roberts, 1995).  
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43           Apart from these two types of signals, we also, where relevant, pay attention to those  
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45 signals that patrons send when they make statements or perform actions vis-à-vis the country in  
46  
47 question that happens outside of the UN SC forum, albeit only if in close connection to it  
48  
49 temporally. If, for example, a protective stance in the council is supplemented with a great power  
50  
51 patron shipping weapons or making encouraging diplomatic visits this of course makes for an even  
52  
53 stronger signal of support. Without attention to those bilateral interactions that can augment  
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58 \_\_\_\_\_  
59 <sup>2</sup> Although the adoption of the agenda is a procedural matter and therefore cannot be subject to a formal veto, a patron  
60 can effectively block an agenda item if it manages to gather seven or more votes against it.

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4 supportive or unsupportive UN SC signals, we risk overstating or understating their independent  
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6 effects.  
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### 10 *Case choice*

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13 Turning to the case settings, three considerations guide our choice. First, to study the effect of  
14  
15 patron signals in connection with UN SC meetings, we need cases that meet two criteria: i)  
16  
17 autocrats face large-scale, predominately peaceful protests; ii) the event reaches the minimum  
18  
19 threshold of being discussed, or being considered to be discussed, in the Council. The second  
20  
21 criteria, of course, dramatically reduces the case universe as by far most mass mobilization events  
22  
23 are never brought up in the UN SC. But those that do reach (or come close to reaching) the  
24  
25 Council's agenda are likely to be examples of protest events, where regime and opposition actors  
26  
27 across cases will pay particular attention to positions and actions of the great powers.  
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32 Second, we opted for cases that are relatively similar across a number of potential  
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34 confounding factors that might otherwise affect both the behavior of the great power patrons and  
35  
36 the domestic actors. For one, we keep the international order constant (Davenport, 2007c). With  
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38 cases close to each other temporally, the relative power and the broader interests of the great  
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40 powers, including their view on the appropriateness of using repression, is accounted for.  
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44 In addition, we seek to control for the severity and the character of the threat by only  
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46 analyzing protest events that feature repeated, escalating and regime-threatening, but predominately  
47  
48 peaceful, mobilization against the incumbent regime. As noted earlier, we do not rule out that our  
49  
50 theoretical proposition could not also apply to more violent forms of mass protests or to less  
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52 threatening scenarios. But as it has been argued that it is easier to legitimize and carry out  
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54 repression, and to win support for it in the international arena, if challengers resort to overt violence  
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4 (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011), we can make more robust inferences based on our case studies if  
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6 this factor is held constant.  
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9 Finally, with cases relatively similar to each other in domestic characteristics, we  
10 control for a number of factors normally associated with state repression that might also affect the  
11 propensity with which and the way in which great powers would interfere. All three countries  
12 analyzed constitute examples of poor, long-standing, entrenched autocracies. Studies have shown  
13 that low development levels and regime persistence have a significant positive effect on the level of  
14 state repression (Hill & Jones, 2014). So does prior experience with using hard repression (Carey,  
15 2010; Levitsky & Way, 2010). Thus, we should, *ceteris paribus*, expect all three incumbents to  
16 stand firm and fight their challengers. Moreover, when carrying out the three case studies we found  
17 no evidence indicating that any of the three regimes were considered particularly weak or  
18 obviously fragile at the time when the popular uprisings began, something that otherwise might  
19 affect both the perceived cost of repression on the side of the incumbent regime (Pierskalla, 2010)  
20 and the readiness of the great power patron to stand up for its protégé.  
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37 Lastly, with the case choice we also rule out two additional prominent alternative  
38 explanations. Following Ulfelder (2005), we should expect the personalist regime of Burkina Faso  
39 to be more prone to “circle the wagons” and employ indiscriminate violence than the Zimbabwean  
40 party regime and the Burmese military regime (cf., Geddes, 1999; Ulfelder, 2005). We observe the  
41 exact opposite. Also the theory that emphasize that minority-led regimes are more likely to fight  
42 back with excessive violence (Barany, 2013; Bellin, 2012; Nepstad, 2013) cannot explain our cases  
43 since neither represents examples of such ethnic stacking of the coercive apparatus.  
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53 As our third and final criteria, we wanted cases that are *diverse* (Seawright & Gerring,  
54 2008), meaning that they ensure representative variation on the main independent variable (patron  
55 support in the UN SC) and the dependent variable (the use of repression). Burma is a case in which  
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4 the regime enjoys strong, albeit not unconditional support, mainly from China but also from Russia;  
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6 Zimbabwe represents a case of resolute and consistent protection from both Russia and China; in  
7  
8 Burkina Faso, support from the US and France is withdrawn as pressure against President  
9  
10 Compaoré mounts. While both the Burmese and the Zimbabwean regime initially resort to severe  
11  
12 violence to maintain power, only in Zimbabwe is the high-intensity coercion maintained throughout  
13  
14 the full event period. In contrast, the Burkinabé President flees the country after only half-hearted  
15  
16 use of coercive means. The chosen cases thus represent two positive cases (with varying degrees of  
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18 patron support and varying degrees of repression) and one negative case (in which prior strong  
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20 support is suddenly withdrawn and coercion is aborted).  
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### 27 *Analytical strategy*

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29 A key challenge with testing the validity of the central theoretical propositions of this paper is the  
30  
31 opacity of the processes involved. We cannot expect autocrats, coercive agents, or key opposition  
32  
33 actors and ordinary protesters to openly acknowledge the role that international signals play (though  
34  
35 in some of the analyzed cases they actually do so). In the absence of smoking-gun evidence in most  
36  
37 individual cases, we must necessarily lend weight instead to the observable implications and the  
38  
39 overall pattern that emerges from within-case and cross-case comparisons.  
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43 For each country case, we analyze how the protest event develops across time,  
44  
45 tracking not only when repression is applied for the first time but also how the use of coercion  
46  
47 varies across the full event period. Trends in the use of repression is held up against the behavior of  
48  
49 the great powers of the UN SC across the analyzed period. Each issuance of patron signals at the  
50  
51 UN level and developments at the domestic level thus constitutes a number of within-case  
52  
53 observations (Gerring, 2004, pp. 343–344). Do we, across these cases, find that the timing of the  
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55 initial use of repression and the stepping up of it follows signals of support from great power  
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4 patrons then we take this as evidence of our general hypothesis. Likewise so if we find that the full  
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6 stop to coercive campaigns or the reduction of repressive activities follows directly after patrons  
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8 issuing signals that indicate a withdrawal or a more restrained form of support. Finally, can we  
9  
10 muster evidence that the relevant actors – such as autocrats or opposition activists – actively seek to  
11  
12 influence the actions of the great powers in the UN SC, or they openly acknowledge the patron’s  
13  
14 importance for the development of key episodes, we can be even more certain of the validity of our  
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16 main claim. From case to case, we discuss the strength of the available evidence and where relevant  
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18 hold it up against the most likely alternative explanation.  
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### 25 **Burma 2007: The Saffron Revolution**

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27 In mid-2007, the “Saffron Revolution” hit the entrenched Burmese military dictatorship. The  
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29 demonstrations, that were triggered by a drastic slashing of fuel subsidies on 15 August 2007,  
30  
31 constituted the most significant protests against the junta since the massive uprisings of 1988. The  
32  
33 cut in subsidies had an immediate impact on the cost of food, transport, and electricity in the capital  
34  
35 Rangoon and across the country (McCarthy, 2008, p. 307). Small and scattered protests followed  
36  
37 immediately, and from mid-September, civilians in rising numbers took to the streets and called for  
38  
39 broader political and economic reforms, including demands for democracy (Hlaing, 2008, p. 130;  
40  
41 Selth, 2008, pp. 281–283). Across the country, large-scale demonstrations with more than 100,000  
42  
43 participants took place. Protestors, led by Buddhist monks (as in the 1988 uprising), now openly  
44  
45 called for an end to military rule and clearly showed their support for the opposition party of  
46  
47 longtime regime-opponent Aung San Suu Kyi.  
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53 The de facto-leader of the Junta, Senior General Than Shwe, reacted in accordance  
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55 with the “law of coercive responsiveness.” On 26 September, security forces were ordered to squash  
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57 the popular rebellion. The police used tear gas, shot directly into the crowds, and numerous  
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4 protesters were beat up with bamboo sticks. Thousands were arrested, and a large, however  
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6 disputed, number was killed (Hlaing, 2008, pp. 132–133; McCarthy, 2008, pp. 307–310). Even  
7  
8 though smaller protests took place in several towns during October and November, this major  
9  
10 crackdown effectively took the steam out of the revolution (International Crisis Group, 2008, p. 3).  
11  
12 Nonetheless, the Burmese regime surprisingly adopted a more accommodating stance towards its  
13  
14 opponents. Throughout the fall, Than Shwe showed hitherto unseen restraint and willingness to  
15  
16 negotiate with the opposition. As we show below, an important explanation for this coercive pattern  
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18 is to be found in changing signals sent from powerful great power patrons.  
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#### 25 *Russo-Chinese signals of support and their effects on regime repression*

26  
27 When the Saffron Revolution hit Burma, the military junta knew that it had strong allies in Russia  
28  
29 and China in the Security Council. Tellingly, the two patrons had, through the use of the hidden  
30  
31 veto, shielded Burma from even entering the Security Council agenda several times prior to the  
32  
33 revolution. In fact, Burma did not figure on the UN SC agenda until September 2006 (International  
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35 Crisis Group, 2008, p. 6; United Nations, 2006). But even after this, Russia and China upheld their  
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37 protective measures (United Nations, 2007a, 2007d), albeit also emphasizing a greater need for the  
38  
39 regime to show willingness to cooperate with and listen to the international community. However,  
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41 when the protests swirled, the two patrons did initially reaffirm their unconditional support. Only  
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43 later they sent more restrained signals of support, which had a clear impact on the coercive strategy  
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45 applied by the Burmese leadership.  
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51           Already in the beginning of September, when frequent, albeit small, protests were  
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53 picking up, Burmese authorities officially requested a meeting with its Chinese allies. On 13  
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55 September 2007, the Foreign Minister U Nyan Win met with the Chinese State Councilor, Tang  
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57 Jiaxuan. In a press conference, the latter expressed the hope that Burma would “push forward a  
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4 democracy process that is *appropriate* for the country” and ”restore internal stability as soon as  
5 possible” (Storey, 2007). This intentional ambiguous statement constituted the first clear signal that  
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9 China intended to support the regime during the rapidly escalating crisis.

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11 In the following weeks, demonstrations in Rangoon and Mandalay swelled and  
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13 gradually spread to other parts of the country. Western countries, with the UK and the US in the  
14  
15 lead, urged the regime to refrain from repression and threatened to implement bilateral sanctions  
16  
17 and push for actions through the UN.<sup>3</sup> But Burma’s patrons stood firm by its side. China’s Foreign  
18  
19 Ministry made its support for the principle of non-interference very clear in a statement issued on  
20  
21 25 September 2007, and Russia concurrently declared that it considered the events “internal affairs”  
22  
23 of Burma (Storey, 2007). It is noteworthy that these signals of support were given on the same day  
24  
25 that both demonstrations and pressure from the West reached its apex. Even more striking is it that  
26  
27 on the very next day, 26 September 2007, the de-facto leader of Burma, Senior General Than Shwe,  
28  
29 ordered a massive and brutal crackdown on monks, opposition activists, and ordinary protesters. It  
30  
31 may perhaps not be surprising that the regime decided to use force to quell the Saffron Revolution  
32  
33 given that widespread repression and severe human rights violations had previously been its  
34  
35 hallmarks. However, it is interesting that this took place immediately after patrons in the UN SC  
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37 signaled that they would oppose UN-sponsored punitive measures. The timing of the initial use of  
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39 repression is the first evidence in support of our main hypothesis.  
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46 Moreover, we know that disagreements within the regime was growing. In the past  
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48 year, defections from the army had been on the rise, and during the early phase of the protests,  
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50 soldiers had refused to use violence against the demonstrators. Finally, we know that the head of the  
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52 army, Vice Senior General Maung Aye directly opposed Than Shwe’s hard stance towards the  
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58 <sup>3</sup> Washington Post: “Bush Announces Sanctions Against Burma,” 25 September 2007; the Telegraph: “Burmese  
59 military order curfew to stem protests,” 25 September 2007.  
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4 protesters.<sup>4</sup> All this speak against the use of high intensity coercion on the 26 September 2017, or at  
5  
6 least it should make it much less likely. We do not know whether the rank and file paid attention to  
7  
8 the actions of the country's great power patrons, but it is indeed likely that the signals of support  
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10 hardened the resolve of Burma's *de facto* leader in a highly uncertain situation. It is also plausible  
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12 that it did help him maintain the upper hand within the regime at a time when internal opposition  
13  
14 was growing.  
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18           Immediately following the violent crackdown, the Security Council convened for a  
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20 closed emergency meeting (Security Council Report, 2016). The council unanimously supported the  
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22 Secretary-General's decision to dispatch the UN Special Adviser to the region, Ibrahim Gambari,  
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24 but China and Russia blocked a US-sponsored resolution that would have condemned, and possibly  
25  
26 constrained, the Burmese Junta's ability to implement further coercive actions (Storey, 2007). Thus,  
27  
28 at the height of the uprisings, China and Russia not only sent the initial signal that they would  
29  
30 accept a violent crackdown should the Burmese leader decide to pursue such actions, but they also,  
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32 through their veto power in the UN SC, made sure that Than Shwe would not be disturbed in his  
33  
34 attempts to quell domestic dissent. The coercive apparatus in Burma responded swiftly in an  
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36 attempt to clear the streets before the arrival of the UN Special Advisor. In the following days, "any  
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38 protesters who dared to march were met with tear gas, baton charges and, on several occasions,  
39  
40 lethal force" (Selth, 2008, p. 283). Had China and Russia not signaled their support for the  
41  
42 crackdown, the international pressure on the regime and its coercive agents would have been much  
43  
44 more intense. In particular so as the regional organization, ASEAN, to which Burma is a member,  
45  
46 for the first time ever spoke out loudly against the violence in a statement unanimously adopted on  
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48 the same day as the UN SC meeting was held (Emmerson, 2008, pp. 72–73; Selth, 2008, p. 285).  
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59 <sup>4</sup> The Guardian: "How Junta Stemmed a Saffron Tide," 30 September 2007.  
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4           Although China explicitly ruled out further Security Council actions, it soon made it  
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6 clear to the Burmese leadership that it had to cooperate with the UN special envoy, Gambari,  
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8 including giving him access to meet both senior generals as well as the opposition leader Aung San  
9  
10 Suu Kyi (International Crisis Group 2008, 6). The Junta eventually bowed to the international  
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12 pressure and allowed Gambari to enter the country and meet twice with Aung San Suu Kyi (on 30  
13  
14 September and 2 October, 2007) (International Crisis Group, 2008, p. 7). Thus, the Chinese effort,  
15  
16 which was explicitly noted by UN special envoy Gambari at his briefing to the Security Council on  
17  
18 5 October 2007 (United Nations, 2007e), did have an effect on the junta's willingness to accept  
19  
20 international mediation. Coercion and intimidation could have continued unabated as it did during  
21  
22 the 1988 uprisings, but the Burmese leader chose to reduce it significantly. Again the timing of the  
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24 change of strategy speaks in favor of our main hypothesis. So does the contrast to the persistent use  
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26 of coercion that the regime applied in 1988.  
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32           On 2 October, China and Russia unexpectedly changed course and supported the  
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34 adoption of a Human Rights Council resolution criticizing the violent crackdown. Even though  
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36 China now publicly urged restraint in the government's response to the opposition (Kleine-  
37  
38 Ahlbrandt & Small, 2008), both Russia and China insisted that the language of the resolution was  
39  
40 softened (Storey, 2007). The day after, the US requested yet another Security Council meeting on  
41  
42 "the situation in Myanmar" (United Nations, 2007b), which eventually took place on 5 October. At  
43  
44 this point, it does indeed seem that Than Shwe sincerely feared that UN sanctions might be the  
45  
46 outcome. The day before the meeting, the Burmese incumbent surprisingly offered to negotiate with  
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48 the opposition and meet with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. While the offer was effectively  
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50 meaningless because of a number of unreasonable conditions, it is remarkable because it is *the* first  
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52 offer by Than Shwe to meet with the opposition leader.<sup>5</sup> Had he not cared about the reaction of the  
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59 <sup>5</sup> The Telegraph: "Aung San Suu Kyi: leader offered meeting," 4 October 2007.  
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4 international community, or had he received signals of unconditional support from his great power  
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6 patrons, he would most likely never have made such an offer.<sup>6</sup>  
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9         However, at the Security Council meeting on 5 October, China reaffirmed its support  
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11 for the Burmese leadership by publicly announcing that it supported the good offices of the  
12  
13 Secretary-General but nothing more, stating that “the current situation does not pose any threat to  
14  
15 international or regional peace and security” (United Nations, 2007e). A similar statement was  
16  
17 made by Russia. As an indication of the importance that the Burmese authorities attached to this  
18  
19 meeting, the regime later in the UN General Assembly publicly expressed its “deep appreciation to  
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21 the members of the Security Council” that hindered any actions at the open meeting on 5 October  
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23 2007 (United Nations, 2007e, p. 18).  
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27         Even though the very first Presidential Statement on Burma was surprisingly adopted  
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29 by the UN SC six days later, on 11 October, in a closed meeting (United Nations, 2007c), its  
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31 powerful supporters had effectively shielded the country from UN sanctions and only supported  
32  
33 calls from the international community for a de-escalation of the conflict when the Junta had  
34  
35 effectively dealt with the initial, massive protest wave. However, based on the public statements of  
36  
37 the Burmese authorities and the timing of Than Shwe’s changes of strategy it appears that the  
38  
39 incumbent understood that he could no longer count on Russia’s or China’s unconditional support.  
40  
41 In sync with increasingly restrained signals of support from his great power patrons, Than Shwe for  
42  
43 the first time, chose a less defiant and more accommodating stance towards the domestic  
44  
45 opposition. A change of position that was continued in the following months (Hlaing, 2008, p. 141).  
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50         Summing up, the sequence of the events clearly favor the interpretation that Than  
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52 Shwe acted in accordance with the signals sent from his patrons at the UN level. When China and  
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54 Russia sent supportive signals, Than Shwe stood firm against his challengers and unleashed a brutal  
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60 <sup>6</sup> BBC: “Burma party rejects junta’s terms,” 9 October 2007.

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4 violent crackdown. When more restrained signals of patron support were sent, he embraced a  
5  
6 strategy of dialogue and concessions. The main alternative interpretation is that Than Shwe feared  
7  
8 that the continuance of violence would endanger the internal cohesion of the regime. Cracks among  
9  
10 the ruling elites were growing and the rank and file were showing signs of increasing discontent.  
11  
12 However, this seemingly only made Than Shwe more dependent on the position of his external  
13  
14 patrons. When Russia and China showed unconditional support, he defied his soft-liner opponents  
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16 within the regime. When this support became more conditional, he turned to the more  
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18 accommodative stance that both satisfied the demands of his great power patrons and that of his  
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20 opponents within the regime.  
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### 27 **Zimbabwe 2008: Popular protests and electoral violence**

28  
29 On 29 March 2008, parliamentary elections and the first round of presidential elections took place  
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31 in Zimbabwe, a country ruled for more than two decades by President Robert Mugabe and his  
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33 hegemonic party, ZANU-PF. According to most observers, the leader of the opposition party, the  
34  
35 Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), Morgan Tsvangirai, had won the majority of the votes  
36  
37 in the first round of the presidential race, and Mugabe was, apparently, ready to acknowledge his  
38  
39 defeat and step down from power (Schaefer & Tkacik, Jr., 2008). However, hardliners in the army  
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41 pushed him for fighting back and, as we will show, Russia and China repeatedly sent signals of  
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43 support that convinced and enabled him to follow through with it.  
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48 For the next 33 days, the regime-controlled electoral commission delayed the  
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50 announcement of the official results, and in the period until the second round of the presidential  
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52 elections three months later, the country was marred by popular protests and a downward spiral of  
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54 ever more horrific state-sponsored violence, primarily carried out by pro-Mugabe war veterans and  
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56 youth militias. On 22 June 2008, Tsvangirai, the opposition leader, clearly fearing for his life,  
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4 sought safety at the Dutch Embassy in the capital Harare and announced that he was withdrawing  
5  
6 from the presidential run-off vote. Mugabe went ahead as scheduled and won the vote unopposed.  
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8 In the following, we show how changes in Mugabe's coercive campaign can be linked directly to  
9  
10 the signals of support sent from great power patrons willing to assist his attempts to reclaim power.  
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16 *Russo-Chinese signals of support and their effects on regime repression*  
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18 President Mugabe had several allies to count on in the UN SC in 2008. Since he officially  
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20 announced his "Look East" foreign policy in 2003, bilateral relations with China had grown  
21  
22 considerably stronger (Hodzi, Hartwell, & De Jager, 2012, p. 87), and Beijing had become a major  
23  
24 donor of aid and loans and figured as the main foreign investor.<sup>7</sup> A similar story can be told with  
25  
26 regards to Russia, from which Mugabe secured numerous favorable trade agreements during the  
27  
28 2000s (Chigora & Goredema, 2010, pp. 195–197). As with the case of Burma, Russia and China  
29  
30 had also protected Zimbabwe in the UN SC on numerous previous occasions (Kleine-Ahlbrandt &  
31  
32 Small, 2008; United Nations, 2005). Besides close ties to Russia and China, the Zimbabwean  
33  
34 regime also enjoyed the support of South Africa, a longtime Mugabe ally, which was an elected  
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36 member of the Security Council during this period and even chaired sessions in April 2008 when  
37  
38 the crisis escalated.  
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43 From the very outset of the Zimbabwean crisis of 2008, China and Russia were  
44  
45 reluctant to support any Security Council interventions. Both patrons vehemently opposed US and  
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47 UK pressure for even including Zimbabwe on the agenda. South Africa also actively sought to hold  
48  
49 Zimbabwe off the table.<sup>8</sup> The Security Council did discuss the events in Zimbabwe informally  
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51 twice (on 16 and 29 April 2008) but only as part of a wider debate on the Peace and Security in  
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58 <sup>7</sup> People's Daily Online: "China ranks Zimbabwe's top investor: senior official," 24 April 2007.

59 <sup>8</sup> Chicago Tribune: "Tsvangirai can't predict end to crisis," 17 April 2008.  
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4 Africa.<sup>9</sup> Thus, in the early phase of the political crisis, Mugabe was given free hands to build up  
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6 support within his regime to deal with domestic challengers as he deemed fit. In this period, regime  
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8 soft-liners were effectively sidelined, while regime hard-liners gained ground.  
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11           However, the first major escalation of the conflict did not follow until directly after  
12  
13 the first UN SC meeting on 16 April 2008. The meeting was held the day after opposition leader  
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15 Tsvangirai had called for a nation-wide general strike and demonstrations meant to paralyze the  
16  
17 Zimbabwean economy and force Mugabe out of power. Though Zimbabwe was not on the formal  
18  
19 agenda, the Western powers used the UN SC meeting to call for free and fair elections and demand  
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21 the release of the delayed election results (at this point, more than two weeks had passed since the  
22  
23 vote). South Africa, on the contrary, argued that any outside interference in the election was to be  
24  
25 handled exclusively through the regional organization, Southern African Development Community  
26  
27 (SADC), known to constitute no real threat to Mugabe's rule. Russia and China backed this  
28  
29 position, and neither mentioned the Zimbabwean issue in their statements given at the meeting  
30  
31 (United Nations, 2008a). On the same day, South African President Mbeki, who officially mediated  
32  
33 Zimbabwe's conflict on behalf of the SADC, met with Mugabe in Harare and publicly declared that  
34  
35 there was no political crisis in Zimbabwe.<sup>10</sup>  
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41           Clearly, China and Russia along with South Africa tried to keep the rapidly escalating  
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43 conflict de-politicized at the international level. In addition, around the same time, China sent a  
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45 shipment of weapons to Zimbabwe. Though the weapons were apparently delayed for months<sup>11</sup> or  
46  
47 never reached its target,<sup>12</sup> this shipment, in combination with the signals of support in the UN SC,  
48  
49 left Mugabe and his coercive apparatus reassured that his patrons had provided him with a carte  
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55 <sup>9</sup> Africa News: "Zimbabwe: UN Snubs MDC-T," 30 April 2008.

56 <sup>10</sup> New York Times: "Slow Motion Coup: Zimbabwe Rounds Up Opposition Members," 26 April 2008.

57 <sup>11</sup><http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2008/07/zimbabwes-enabler-how-chinese-arms-keep-mugabe-in-power>.

58 <sup>12</sup> The Guardian: "Zimbabwe arms shipment returns to China", 24 April 2008; New York Times: "Complex Ties Lead  
59 Ally Not to Condemn Mugabe", 27 June 2008.  
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4 blanche for a major crackdown and would channel the necessary resources to him if needed.  
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6 Following these flows of supportive signals, repression immediately turned much more brutal and  
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8 became more widespread and, not least, more systematic (Bratton & Masunungure, 2008, p. 51). On  
9  
10 25 April 2008, this first round of high-intensity coercion peaked when heavily armed police officers  
11  
12 rounded up and intimidated hundreds of people gathered at the headquarter of MDC. The raid  
13  
14 signaled a “sharp and very public escalation” of the political crisis, which immediately after the first  
15  
16 election had been constrained to far less visible rural areas.<sup>13</sup>  
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20           However, the supportive signals not only affected Mugabe and his regime but also  
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22 those challenging the status quo. The opposition desperately looked to the international arena for  
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24 signals of support that could make regime supporters and perpetrators of repression think twice and  
25  
26 provide the impetus for a re-mobilization of opposition activists and the population at large. On 21  
27  
28 April 2008, opposition leader Tsvangirai met with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and urged  
29  
30 him to push for an UN intervention (Badza 2009, 161). A week later, MDC Secretary-General  
31  
32 Tendai Biti flew to New York City to brief the UN SC on the situation in Zimbabwe at the informal  
33  
34 meeting held on 29 April 2008. Biti made plea for a “strong and decisive” UN SC resolution against  
35  
36 the Mugabe regime and called for the dispatch of a UN Envoy or fact-finding mission to the  
37  
38 country, like in Burma the year before.<sup>14</sup>  
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43           However, at the meeting, Russia, China, and South Africa staunchly opposed this and,  
44  
45 instead, reiterated the argument that SADC should remain the lead actor (International Crisis Group  
46  
47 2008b, 12). Again, a clear signal was sent to both the Mugabe regime and the opposition that the  
48  
49 incumbent was granted a safe conduct by its patrons. Any talks of UN-sponsored interference, say  
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51 good offices mediation or sanctions, were off the table. With complete equanimity, Mugabe could  
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58 <sup>13</sup> Mail & Guardian: “Zimbabwe gloats over UN stalemate,” 30 April 2008.

59 <sup>14</sup> See fn. 13.  
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4 therefore, on May 2, more than a month after the vote, announce that Tsvangirai had won the first  
5  
6 round, albeit not with enough votes to avoid a run-off. The second round of the elections was  
7  
8 scheduled for 27 June. Immediately, violence again intensified. And this even as discouraged and  
9  
10 frightened MDC supporters increasingly stayed off the streets. According to a report by  
11  
12 Zimbabwean doctors, state repression reached “a level of brutality unprecedented in Zimbabwe’s  
13  
14 violent past decade.”<sup>15</sup> Throughout May and in the beginning of June, large-scale repression  
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16 continued unabated though the threat to the immediate survival of the Mugabe regime had long  
17  
18 abated.  
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22  
23 On June 12 and 18, a few weeks before the scheduled second round of presidential  
24  
25 elections, closed informal meetings on the situation in Zimbabwe were again held in the UN SC but,  
26  
27 once again, without any results. The US pushed hard for gathering support for UN SC actions  
28  
29 against Mugabe. On 19 June, US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, again convened a closed,  
30  
31 informal meeting with diplomats and humanitarian groups urging the Security Council to take  
32  
33 stronger actions against Mugabe (Security Council Report, 2008),<sup>16</sup> but once again, China, Russia,  
34  
35 and South Africa ruled out all further UN actions.<sup>17</sup>  
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39 Reaffirmed in the belief that the international Community remained incapable of  
40  
41 taking action as long as his three patrons stymied all attempts, Mugabe found the road paved for  
42  
43 regaining the presidency. Violence and intimidation reached yet another peak with more than 100  
44  
45 opposition supporters killed, thousands injured and tortured, and widespread destruction of  
46  
47 opposition-related property. With the banning of public rallies by the police and the politics of fear  
48  
49 and repression effectively carried out in the streets, it was becoming increasingly difficult for the  
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56 <sup>15</sup> Embassy of the United Nations, Harare Zimbabwe: “No Pretense Zimbabwe Vote Will Be Free and Fair, Rice Says,”  
57 Press Release 19 June 2008.

58 <sup>16</sup> See fn. 15.

59 <sup>17</sup> See fn. 15.  
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4 opposition to mobilize protesters (Ploch, 2008, pp. 7, 10). Fearing for his own life and those of his  
5  
6 supporters, Tsvangirai on 22 June announced that he was withdrawing from the upcoming elections.  
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9           Immediately after, the Chino-Russian and South African position was softened. On 23  
10  
11 June, the Security Council held its first formal meeting with Zimbabwe on the agenda during the  
12  
13 crisis. China and Russia did not call for a vote on the adoption of Zimbabwe on the agenda, and the  
14  
15 Council even managed to agree on a Presidential Statement (United Nations, 2008b). However, the  
16  
17 statement was much watered down by Russia and China.<sup>18</sup> Although violence was condemned and  
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19 a call for a free and fair election was made (something that was meaningless now that Tsvangirai  
20  
21 had withdrawn from the vote), the Statement did not, like the Presidential Statement on Burma  
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23 (United Nations, 2007c), urge authorities to engage in further cooperation with specific UN  
24  
25 institutions (United Nations, 2008c). In Zimbabwe, attacks on the opposition supporters therefore  
26  
27 continued undaunted, even after Mugabe's reelection on 27 June 2008.  
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32           Hence, in contrast to the Burmese case, Beijing and Moscow firmly and consistently  
33  
34 rejected any kind of UN intervention, including the good offices of the Secretary-General.  
35  
36 Concordantly, and again in contrast to the case of Burma, the Mugabe regime rejected UN  
37  
38 mediation throughout the election crisis. We cannot rule out that Zimbabwe's longtime ruler would  
39  
40 not have opted for repression had he not received supportive signals from his allies in the UN SC.  
41  
42 However, we can conclude that the peaks of repression are clustered around the points in time when  
43  
44 firm signals of support were sent from patrons in the UN SC. Moreover, repression intensified  
45  
46 immediately after supportive signals even when the opposition was showing signs of deep despair  
47  
48 and stayed off the streets. As final evidence, Mugabe himself publicly emphasized the importance  
49  
50 of this support from the outside on several later high-profile occasions such as his inaugural address  
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52 to the newly elected parliament in August 2008, at the opening sessions of the UN General  
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60 <sup>18</sup> New York Times: "Security Council Urges Zimbabwe to Halt Violence," 24 June 2008.

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4 Assembly a month later (Tansey, 2016, p. 119), and after a meeting in Moscow in May 2015 with  
5  
6 Russian President Putin. At this event, Putin tellingly reassured Mugabe: “In the future, as in the  
7  
8 past, we do have it in our power to support Africa and to support Zimbabwe, in particular, in the  
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10 Security Council.”<sup>19</sup>  
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### 15 **Burkina Faso 2014: The Burkinabé Uprising**

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18 In late October 2014, Burkina Faso’s President, Blaise Compaoré, resigned and fled the country to  
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20 neighboring Côte d’Ivoire in the wake of massive popular protests. Compaoré had held sway over  
21  
22 the gold-rich country and its 15 million deeply impoverished citizens for 27 years, and on numerous  
23  
24 occasions, he had vehemently fought, and survived, challenges to his rule. In the first months of  
25  
26 2014, tens of thousands protested against the President’s alleged attempts to make constitutional  
27  
28 changes that would allow him to extend his term limits,<sup>20</sup> and during the spring of 2011, disloyal  
29  
30 groups within the military led several uprisings that spread among the opposition and the wider  
31  
32 population. Compaoré had survived a handful of popular uprisings during the last two decades,<sup>21</sup>  
33  
34 and on several occasions, he had shown that he was not afraid of making use of the loyal  
35  
36 Presidential Guard to restore order.<sup>22</sup>  
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41 In light of this history, it was therefore quite surprising that President Compaoré fled  
42  
43 the country on 31 October 2014 after just four days of mostly non-violent, albeit massive, popular  
44  
45 protests. The day before, the parliament was set to decide on extending the President’s term limits  
46  
47 to make it possible for Compaoré to run for yet another round in the upcoming 2015 presidential  
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49 elections. The opposition had been mobilizing for months, and smaller protests had been  
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54 <sup>19</sup> NewsdzeZimbabwe: “I will protect you, Putin tells Mugabe,” 10 May 2015.

55 <sup>20</sup> Foreign Policy In Focus and TheNation.com: “Burkina Faso’s ‘West African Spring,’” 26 February 2014.

56 <sup>21</sup> BBC: “Burkina Faso profile – Timeline,” 17 January 2016.

57 <sup>22</sup> Foreign Policy In Focus and TheNation.com: “The U.S. Just Lost a Client State in West Africa. What Happens  
58 Now?,” 7 November, 2014; Reuters: “Protests force out Burkina president, soldiers vie for power,” 31 October 2014;  
59 UN Dispatch: “BURKINA FASO V. COMPAORE,” 6 June 2011.  
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4 simmering. On 28 October 2014, protests swelled dramatically. Around 100,000 people took to the  
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6 streets, demonstrating against Compaoré's attempts to make constitutional changes and calling for  
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8 his departure from power. Demonstrations of a similar size continued the next day. Compaoré soon  
9  
10 responded by declaring martial law, and the police used tear gas to disperse the crowd. Three people  
11  
12 were apparently shot dead by the military.<sup>23</sup> However, the martial law was surprisingly rescinded  
13  
14 after only a few hours, and instead, Compaoré offered the opposition to negotiate on a transitional  
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16 government, stating that he had "heard the message" from the protesters and understood "the strong  
17  
18 desire for change."<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, protests continued unabated, and on 30 October, 1,500 protesters  
19  
20 defied tear gas and bullets, broke through road blockages, and torched and ravaged several  
21  
22 government buildings, including the parliament. President Compaoré first declared the withdrawal  
23  
24 of the controversial bill, and the next day, he resigned and fled the country.<sup>25</sup> In the following, we  
25  
26 show that a number of signals indicating that support from the great power patrons of France and  
27  
28 the US was waning played an important role for this rapid and surprising change of strategy of the  
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30 longtime personalist ruler of Burkina Faso.  
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### *The loss of Western patrons in the UN SC and its effects on state repression*

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39  
40 When the popular uprising hit Burkina Faso in late 2014, President Compaoré had good reasons to  
41  
42 believe that he would enjoy support from his longtime Western allies, France and the US. As leader  
43  
44 of a former French colony and a hub for US Special Forces in the fight against terrorism in West  
45  
46 Africa, President Compaoré, had for long benefited from good relations to the West (Santiso &  
47  
48 Loada, 2003, p. 404).<sup>26</sup> Compaoré's strategic importance had even grown in the wake of the coup in  
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55 <sup>23</sup> Pass Blue: "Burkina Faso's People, Opposing an Autocrat, Feel Let Down by the UN," 5 November 2014.

56 <sup>24</sup> The New York Times: "Burkina Faso's President Resigns, and General Takes Reins," 31 October 2014.

57 <sup>25</sup> Global Nonviolent Action Database: "Burkina Faso protesters remove Blaise Compaoré from power, 2014," 3  
58 February, 2015.

59 <sup>26</sup> Iran Daily: ", 17 September 2015.  
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4 neighboring Mali in 2012 and the country was in a US State Department report from 2013  
5  
6 considered “a strong U.S. security and defense partner in the region.”<sup>27</sup>  
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9 In contrast to both Burma and Zimbabwe, and because of this support from  
10  
11 Washington and Paris, Compaoré had never had problems with interference from the UN SC. No  
12  
13 Western great power had pushed for placing Burkina Faso on the agenda, not even when Compaoré  
14  
15 had resorted to repression in the past. After the 2011 protests, the US, in a report on the fight of  
16  
17 terrorism in West Africa, praised the government in Burkina Faso for its resilience to “threats and  
18  
19 dangers posed by terrorist organizations,” deliberately downplaying the fact that instability resulted  
20  
21 from military mutinies and student demonstrations. Following the massive January 2014  
22  
23 demonstrations, the West did not put pressure on Compaoré but rewarded him with additional US  
24  
25 aid funding<sup>28</sup> and increased French military presence in the country.<sup>29</sup> These examples reveal that  
26  
27 President Compaoré had no reason to fear international interference in his bid for constitutional  
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29 changes and yet another five-year term as President.  
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34 However, in early October 2014, President Compaoré received a first warning that  
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36 support from the two patrons might be waning. On 7 October, French President Francois Hollande  
37  
38 sent the incumbent a personal letter in which he urged him to pursue a career in international  
39  
40 institutions instead of trying to extend term limits. Hollande even offered to help Compaoré find a  
41  
42 good way out and appealed to him to take a decision that would make his nation a model to follow  
43  
44 for the region.<sup>30</sup> Should the president choose not to comply, he could expect to face sanctions from  
45  
46 the international community.<sup>31</sup> Hollande thus effectively signaled, albeit exclusively to the  
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53 <sup>27</sup> The Christian Science Monitor: “Why Burkina Faso matters to US counterterrorism efforts in Africa,” 3 November  
54 2014 .

55 <sup>28</sup> USAID press release: “USAID announces rise: a new initiative to build resilience in West Africa’s Sahel,” 8 February  
56 2014.

57 <sup>29</sup> See fn. 34.

58 <sup>30</sup> Reuters: “France says Burkina Faso must keep to African rules on political change,” 28 October 2014.

59 <sup>31</sup> Reuters: “‘One game too far’: the downfall of Burkina Faso’s president,” 2 November 2014.  
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4 incumbent and perhaps those closest to him, that protection from UN-sponsored interventions could  
5  
6 now be a thing of the past. However, with the letter, he also showed that if Compaoré chose to step  
7  
8 down and leave the country, France would help find a destination for exile, thus offering him the  
9  
10 personal security guarantees that his domestic challengers could not deliver.  
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13           As we hypothesized, this personal security guarantee initially made the incumbent  
14  
15 prone to gamble. On 21 October, Compaoré announced that a Constitutional Amendment Bill  
16  
17 would soon be presented in Parliament. This immediately sparked what was to become a wave of  
18  
19 protests. At first, the gamble seemed to succeed. Over the next heated days, France and the US  
20  
21 remained silent, and even though several meetings were held in the UN SC, Burkina Faso was at no  
22  
23 point sought added to the agenda. Had Paris or Washington been bent on obstructing Compaoré's  
24  
25 bid for a third term, they could have made a first attempt at one of these meetings. Thus, the threats  
26  
27 issued by Hollande in early October now seemed less credible to the longtime ruler of Burkina  
28  
29 Faso. Likewise, insiders and coercive agents saw no reasons to question the durability of the  
30  
31 regime.  
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36           This changed on 28 October 2014. That day, the protests in the capital Ouagadougou  
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38 exploded with around 100,000 people on the streets. France immediately appealed to all sides for  
39  
40 restraint and stated that it expected Compaoré to adhere to the laws drawn up by his peers at the  
41  
42 African Union (AU) and not to push through the constitutional reform.<sup>32</sup> The opposition interpreted  
43  
44 this statement as a clear sign that the power of the president was waning. Protests continued  
45  
46 unabated even though police forces repeatedly fired tear gas against the crowds. On 30 October, the  
47  
48 parliament was to vote on the proposed constitutional changes. Protesters sought to enter the  
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50 parliamentary buildings and were met with bullets. The US embassy in Ouagadougou, however,  
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52 made a timely interference. The State Department declared that it was "concerned by the spirit and  
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59 <sup>32</sup> See fn. 31.  
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4 intent behind the proposed amendment to lift the term limits,” and urged “all involved, including  
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6 Burkina Faso’s security forces, to adhere to non-violence, and to debate this issue in a peaceful and  
7  
8 inclusive manner.”<sup>33</sup> Within a few hours, the AU echoed the call for restraint and “urged the  
9  
10 government of Burkina Faso to respect the wishes of the people,” and UN Secretary General Ban-  
11  
12 Ki Moon vowed to dispatch an envoy to the country to follow the situation closely (a message that  
13  
14 would be unthinkable had he not cleared it with the US and France in advance). Almost  
15  
16 simultaneously, cracks in the security apparatus began to appear as military officers and rank-and-  
17  
18 file cadres refused to follow orders and sided with the opposition.<sup>34</sup> In the afternoon, the French  
19  
20 ambassador openly held talks with opposition leaders, clearly signaling that Compaoré should no  
21  
22 longer be counting on assistance from Paris.<sup>35</sup> The number of defections now increased rapidly.  
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27           The longtime president of Burkina Faso was clearly losing his grip on power, and his  
28  
29 ability to employ violence to restore it was fading too. The complete pullout of support from the  
30  
31 side of his two former patrons served to both trigger and speed up the process, and the fact that  
32  
33 France assisted Compaoré in finding an exile destination<sup>36</sup> most likely explains why the man who  
34  
35 had ruled the country for 27 years decided to rescind martial law after only a few hours and instead  
36  
37 offered to negotiate the terms for a transitional government. In contrast to the Burmese and  
38  
39 Zimbabwean cases, brute repression was no longer an option, and a way out was on offer. The next  
40  
41 day, Compaoré resigned and, with president Hollande’s help, fled the country to neighboring Cote  
42  
43 d’Ivoire, where he has now been granted Ivorian citizenship.<sup>37</sup> Again the character of signals sent  
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45 from great power patrons had shaped the coercive strategy of a dictator faced by massive domestic  
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47 protests.  
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55 <sup>33</sup> US Department of State: “Spokesperson Psaki on Proposed Changes to Burkina Faso Term Limits,” 30 October 2014.

56 <sup>34</sup> BBC: “As it happened: Burkina Faso unrest,” 30 October, 2014.

57 <sup>35</sup> Reuters: “Burkina army imposes interim government after crowd burns parliament,” 30 October 2014.

58 <sup>36</sup> France 24: “France helped Compaoré flee Burkina Faso unrest, Hollande says,” 11 April 2014.

59 <sup>37</sup> BBC: “Burkina Faso ex-leader Blaise Compaore becomes Ivorian,” 24 February 2016.  
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## Conclusion

In line with recent publications that stress the importance of international factors for domestic developments, this study shows that mere signals of support from powerful patrons bear influence on the propensity to which and the severity with which autocrats use repressive means to mitigate domestic challenges to their rule. Authoritarian rulers who receive signals of support not only seem more likely to survive challenges to their power, but they also behave more resolutely and aggressively towards their domestic opponents. Where patron support to a dictator is unexpectedly withdrawn, rulers and their followers become more hesitant to use force, eventually putting regime survival at risk. Studying signals of support thus seems crucial if we wish to understand the timing and the changing character of repressive campaigns in authoritarian regimes. To learn more about the factors likely to condition the relationship, more research – both across cases and more in depth within cases – is needed. Here, we have made a first step, showing that this is likely to be a fruitful endeavor.

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