Political Repression and the Destruction of Dissident Organizations

evidence from the archives of the guatemalan national police

By CHRISTOPHER M. SULLIVAN

How does repression influence overt, collective challenges directed against political authority? To date, answers to this question have been inconclusive. This article argues that recent works inadequately address the topic because the focus has been on repression’s impact on local civilians, with less consideration of dissident organizations. The author develops an organizational theory of challenger development and specifies predictions for how repression’s effects on dissent are contingent upon the types of organizational behaviors targeted for coercion. The analysis employs original, microlevel data collected from previously confidential Guatemalan National Police records to assess the effects of repression during the years 1975 to 1985. Results show that the effects of repression are more complex than previously imagined. When repression targets the clandestine activities necessary to develop and sustain dissident organizations, such as holding meetings, training participants, and campaigning for funds, dissent declines significantly. But when repression is directed at ongoing, overt, collective challenges, it motivates a backlash that escalates dissent. Implications are drawn for how political order and conflict are understood and studied.

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