



Democratization

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fdem20>

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Lisa-Marie Selvik & Kendra Dupuy

To cite this article: Lisa-Marie Selvik & Kendra Dupuy (2023): Government repression and citizen support for democratic rights in Africa, Democratization, DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2023.2173738

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2023.2173738>



Published online: 06 Feb 2023.



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RESEARCH ARTICLES



Government repression and citizen support for democratic rights in Africa

Lisa-Marie Selvik ^a and Kendra Dupuy ^b

^aDepartment of Comparative Politics, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway; ^bFridtjof Nansen Institute, Oslo, Norway

ABSTRACT

Public opinion polls conducted over the past five years point to a downward trend in African citizens' support for civil society and media freedoms. This is despite the flourishing of civil society and media actors as well as the expansion of democracy on the continent in the post-Cold War period. What explains this downward trend in public support? We use cross-national polling data from the Afrobarometer survey to examine the decline in public support for freedoms of association and media between 2011 and 2018 in the African context, a continent that has experienced decades of democratization waves and pressure. Using a multilevel statistical modelling approach, we analyse the influence of government repression of civil society and media actors on citizen support for enhanced government control over freedoms of association and the media. Our study shows that the government's repressive actions against civil society and media actors increases the probability that citizens will support control over association and media freedoms. Concerningly, this suggests government clampdowns on democratic rights influences the African publics to support such clampdowns, potentially legitimizing them.


ARTICLE HISTORY Received 1 April 2022; Accepted 24 January 2023

KEYWORDS Democracy; human rights; public opinion; Africa; repression; civil society; media

Introduction

As part of the fourth wave of democratization, and particularly after the end of the Cold War, the African continent witnessed an exponential growth in numbers of civil society organizations and a flourishing of media actors. International democratization pressures resulted in positive gains across the continent in citizens and non-state actors' abilities to exercise freedoms of association, assembly, and expression. And yet, in recent years, there has been a notable downward trend in the region in public support for these particular democratic freedoms.¹ This phenomenon is taking place in a larger context of a global backlash against democracy, wherein African political elites are challenging and dismantling democratic institutions and liberal rights/ political civil liberties in order to maintain their hold on power.²

CONTACT Kendra Dupuy  kdupuy@fni.no

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2023.2173738>.

In this article, we investigate the decline in citizen support for freedoms of association and media in Africa. Specifically, we look at whether the ongoing political push-back against civil society and media actors and freedoms has had an impact on public opinion about whether and to what degree the government should enable, versus restrict or control, freedoms of association and media. The role of increased government repression of civil society and media actors in shaping public opinion about the basic democratic principles that empower these actors has been largely neglected thus far in the scholarly literature on citizens' demand for democracy.³ This repression has taken the form of new regulations that restrict the ability of civil society organizations and media outlets to form and operate, as well as extra-legal harassment, intimidation, and the use of outright violence by government officials against these non-state actors.

We argue that this repressive behaviour plays a strong role in influencing public attitudes as to how associational and media life should be regulated. To test this hypothesis, we employ three rounds of public opinion data covering 36 African countries for the years 2011–2018 from the Afrobarometer survey in combination with data on levels of government repression of association and media freedoms from the Varieties of Democracy dataset. Using multilevel logistic regressions, we model the probability of respondents supporting enhanced government control over freedoms of association and the media as a function of how much the government represses civil society and media actors. In line with our theoretical expectations, our analysis shows that higher levels of government repression of civil society and media actors is, in fact, positively associated with higher levels of public support for government control over these actors and sectors.

We proceed as follows. We first provide more contextual information about public support for civil society and media freedoms in Africa. We then outline a theory of the relationship between government repression and public opinion regarding these freedoms, drawing out our core hypotheses. We present our data, conceptualizations, and methodological approach to test our hypotheses about the influence of government repression on public support for civil society and media freedoms. We conclude with reflections on areas of future research on this topic, as well as on the implications of our findings for democratization in low-income regions and countries.

Our work makes three contributions. First, we provide novel insights into the influence of government behaviour on public opinion about civil society and media freedoms in a developing country context, an area of inquiry that has to date been largely neglected in the public opinion literature. Second, we add to the emerging literature on the consequences of the global democratic backlash, showing that ruling regimes can build popular support for democratic retrenchment through targeted roll-backs of particular rights and freedoms. Here we also contribute to the study of democracy, showing how the legitimacy of democratic institutions depends heavily on the actions and discourse of officials. Third, we also contribute to the literature on the politics of liberal rights in Africa, shedding light on the continued fragility that characterizes the state of the political and civil liberties that are so fundamental to democratic rule and quality of civic life on the continent.

Democracy and public opinion in Africa

In the African context, survey data from Afrobarometer shows a downward regional trend in popular support for several democratic freedoms.⁴ In particular, as [Figure 1](#)

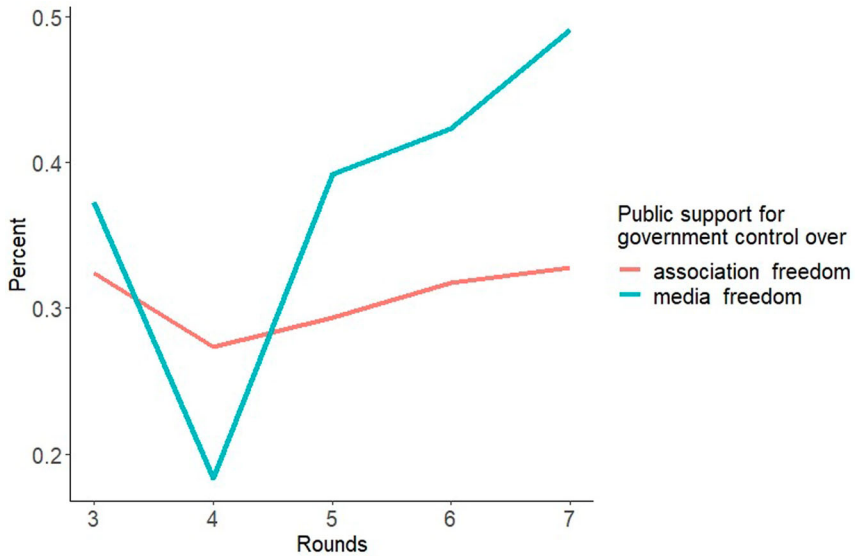


Figure 1. Average levels of public support for government control over association and media freedoms in 34 African countries, 2005–2018. Support is measured using Afrobarometer Data (2021) for the years 2005–2018, where 18 countries are surveyed in round 3 (2005–2006), 20 countries in round 4 (2008–2009), 34 countries in round 5 (2011–2013), 36 countries in round 6 (2014–2015), and 34 countries in round 7 (2016–2018). For more on how public support for government control is measured, see the discussion in the data and methods section of this article. This graph is based on weighted responses available from citizens in the following 34 countries: Benin; Botswana; Cape Verde; Ghana; Kenya; Lesotho; Madagascar; Malawi; Mali; Mozambique; Namibia; Nigeria; South Africa; Senegal; Tanzania; Uganda; Zambia; Zimbabwe; Liberia; Cameroon; Côte d’Ivoire; Guinea; Mauritius; Morocco; Niger; Sierra Leone; Sudan; eSwatini; Togo; Tunisia; Gabon; Sao Tome and Principe; Burkina Faso; and Gambia.

shows, African citizens’ support for enhanced government control over freedom of association and freedom of the media has increased during the past ten years, since the lowest point in 2008–2009.

This trend in citizen support is puzzling given that large majorities of Africans continue to support democracy overall and reject authoritarian alternatives, and that most sub-Saharan African citizens understand democracy in terms of civil liberties and personal freedoms.⁵ Furthermore, non-governmental civil society organizations and the media sectors are – and have been – important actors in Africa’s social, economic, and political development.⁶ In Africa, as in much of the Global South and former communist countries, both the civil society and independent media sectors expanded in the post-Cold War era largely due to economic and political support from Western donors and institutions.⁷ As a result, civil society organization numbers in Africa exploded after 1990, and foreign-funded civil society organizations emerged as important service providers and advocates for democracy and human rights. Simultaneously, media actors have become often the strongest critics – and the point of “attack” – for political incumbents in the absence of (or sometimes in cooperation with) a viable political opposition.⁸ Public support is vital for both civil society and media actors to perform their intended democratic functions as “voices” and “watchdogs” for the people, given that public support determines both their legitimacy and credibility in interaction with political actors and the general public.⁹

Despite the expansion of associational and media life in Africa and the critical role these freedoms play in the institutionalization of democracy, there has been both a decrease in citizen support for association and media rights on the continent and an uptick in government repression of these rights. Whether there is a relationship between these two trends has not yet been empirically investigated. Since the 2000s, government repression of the freedoms of association and media in Africa has manifested itself in the form of new legal restrictions as well as extra-legal harassment and violence against civil society organizations and journalists.¹⁰ When we focus on the public's support for enhanced government control over these freedoms, we do so in a context where governments have increasingly put in place cumbersome legal obligations and/or arbitrarily banned organizations working on politically sensitive topics as well as media outlets viewed as breeding grounds for the mobilization of political dissent. This trend goes beyond the repression and banning of illegal organizations like terrorist groups or groups that violate domestic laws against bodily and gender mutilation, torture, killing of specific groups in society, hate groups, and so on. Rather, we argue that it represents a closing of democratic space and a retrenchment of democracy itself.

An example of increased government repression of the freedoms of association and media can be seen in Tanzania, where in recent years the government has put in place new regulations to control and narrow the space for people to participate in associational life and in the media scene.¹¹ Afrobarometer Data, "All Countries" show an increase in public support for the government's right to ban organizations, from 25% in 2014 to 42% in 2017, and to control media outlets, from 17% in 2014 to 42% in 2017. With regards to support for media freedom, Tanzania represented the deepest drop in public support in Africa during the same time period.¹² This example highlights the need to examine the relation between governments' repressive actions and public support for these democratic freedoms.

Popular support for civil society and media freedoms

The question of popular demand for democracy as a form of political rule – and for specific democratic rights and freedoms – has received substantial scholarly attention, particularly with increased discussions in recent years about the significance of support for democracy in processes of democratic backsliding.¹³ Analysis of the popular underpinnings of democratic rule also extends to Africa, where rulers have chipped away at the supply of democracy by undermining democratic institutions and principles to shore up autocratic rule. But do such actions trend with popular opinion? In other words, do the repressive actions of government to restrict the supply of democracy negatively shape popular demand for specific democratic rights and freedoms?

It should first be noted that there is a two-way, endogenous relationship between public opinion and the actions of government: how a country is ruled, and what policies and laws are put into place, both influence public opinion, and are influenced by it. The public shapes government officials and their actions because elected government officials are supposed to be responsive to the attitudes of the masses on whose behalf they rule. Democratically elected government officials are especially sensitive to public opinion since it is the vote of citizens that determines their stay in office, though even autocratic rulers have a need to keep citizens content in order to remain in power, for instance through social spending and wealth distribution.¹⁴

But the reverse is also true: governments can and do influence their publics; existing policies shape future policies as well as mass political participation and attitudes.¹⁵

Scholars have put forward different explanations as to why and how the policy positions of political elites as democratic actors shape public opinion regarding particular policies, democratic institutions, and democratic freedoms. Citizens may be persuaded by elites' arguments or they may defer to politicians' policy judgments and adopt the same position.¹⁶ Citizens also tend to follow party identification, particularly in the context of heightened political polarization.¹⁷ And past policies shape public opinion about current and proposed new policies – also known as “policy feedback effects” (though it should be noted that such feedback effects largely pertain to social policies, rather than regulatory restrictions on democratic rights and freedoms).¹⁸

In the African context, Bratton and Mattes, “Support for Democracy in Africa” find in their analysis of Afrobarometer survey data that Africans do support democracy as a form of government but are not necessarily satisfied with their elected governments. They further argue that the degree to which Africans support democracy hinges on the ability of government to deliver on political rights, rather than economic performance. Supporting this, Doorenspleet, “Critical Citizens, Democratic Support” finds that while African citizens in democratic states support democratic ideals, many citizens express dissatisfaction with the way that democracy actually works in their countries.

Many of these studies we reviewed do not provide much insight into the trend we see in a decline in popular support for specific democratic freedoms. Moreover, much of the scholarship on the impact of government policies and political party and elite positions on public opinion (and vice versa) has been carried out primarily in the context of rich, democratic states in North America and Europe. We thus lack an understanding of the generalizability of these theories and empirical results to developing countries. Finally, there has been a lack of attention to the relationship between government *repression* and public opinion regarding specific rights and freedoms, and in particular how restrictive actions and enhanced government control over civil society and media actors might affect citizens' opinion of and attitudes towards these actors and sectors. One of the few studies that does exist examines this question in the context of Central and Eastern Europe: Anderson, Regan, and Ostergard, “Political Repression and Public Perceptions” find in their analysis of opinion data that heightened government repression negatively impacts citizens' perceptions of human rights conditions (though the analysis does not extend to citizens' support for human rights).

Government repression and public opinion in Africa regarding civil society and media freedoms

Why has popular support for the freedoms of association and media in particular declined in the African region? These are fundamental, enabling rights in a democratic society, and declining popular support for them can be seen as a bellwether for the overall health and robustness of a democracy.¹⁹ In this section, we engage with the existing literatures on public perceptions of civil society and media actors in low- and middle-income countries to develop a set of hypotheses about how and why government repression of civil society and media freedoms might influence public opinion regarding those freedoms. We identify a set of possible causal pathways that should be

tested in future research for how government repression might influence citizen support for civil society and media freedoms. In essence, we argue that the government repressive actions towards civil society and media actors should be examined as a form of information flow to citizens. Government repression, therefore, shapes public opinion about these actors as it either persuades citizens, signals to them, or controls the information space of publics.

First, governments can use repressive measures to *persuade* citizens to reduce their stated support for civil society and media freedoms. Political elites (such as government representatives and party officials) can use persuasive rhetoric to convince otherwise ambiguous or sceptical citizens of the validity of repressive legal and extra-legal measures on specific democratic freedoms. Government repression can affect and prime citizens on a more subconscious level through the use of negative discourse, rhetoric, and stigmatization of certain actors.²⁰ Alternatively (or additionally), as argued by Pousadela and Perera, “The Enemy Within,” governments may outsource discursive persuasion to pro-government, anti-rights NGOs and media outlets, who attack independent civil society organizations and media outlets in an effort to undermine the legitimacy of these actors in the eyes of the public – as has occurred in Nigeria.²¹

Second, citizens may *defer* to the positions of political elites when formulating their publicly expressed political preferences, regardless of their privately held preferences and beliefs. Particularly in more politically repressive environments, signals from political elites regarding preferred policy positions should take on increased importance for citizens, as these signals provide information about what preferences they should reveal publicly so they can successfully navigate and survive such a political environment.²² Dupuy and Prakash, “Why Restrictive NGO Foreign” show how such signalling can influence citizens’ political behaviour: in examining how the introduction of legal restrictions on the non-governmental organization (NGO) sector depresses voter turn-out in African countries, they argue that citizens view these regulations as a part of the democracy recession. In the absence of a vibrant and locally rooted NGO sector, citizens perceive restrictive NGO laws as signalling the onset of authoritarianism and are therefore discouraged to participate politically through voting. Similarly, government repression of civil society and media actors informs citizens of a wider decline in the overall quality of democracy and what opinions are acceptable to publicly express about these actors.

Finally, the level of citizens’ *familiarity* with or simply knowledge of civil society and media actors can influence their support for the rights of these actors to operate freely. Citizens’ support for democratic rights and freedoms are hard to conceptually distinguish from their support of the actors enacting these rights and their conduct, nature, and modes of operation in respective countries. How citizens view civil society and media actors will arguably be intertwined with whether they support the right that these actors have to operate free from government control and restriction. In this respect, citizens’ experience with and knowledge of these actors – their familiarity with them – matter. In their study of citizens’ trust in non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Lee, Johnson, and Prakash, “Media Independence and Trust” highlight that because of “the recent vintage of NGOs in the post-communist Eurasian region, citizens do not have much historical knowledge or cumulative experience to form opinions about these actors.” Their study highlights both the importance of how the public views the societal mandate of non-state actors such as civil society

organizations and media actors, and how governments can shape this opinion through controlling the flow of information, for instance through censorship.

The same can be said for Africa, where formal civil society organizations are often foreign-funded, and larger, urban-based NGOs promoting democracy and good governance are disconnected from local communities. As a result, these groups are sometimes accused of being “grass without roots,”²³ and their legitimacy questioned.²⁴ A common critique for especially civil society organizations dependent on foreign funds is that these actors are more responsive to donors’ concerns as opposed to the needs of the local communities they are supposed to serve, which means these organizations are viewed as advocating for issues that are important to Western audiences, not to local people. Indeed, Dupuy and Prakash, “Why Restrictive NGO Foreign” argue that it is unsurprising that when governments decide to crackdown on NGOs and justify it by branding NGOs as foreign agents, there is little popular opposition by citizens in response.

Similar critiques are facing African media sectors. Many Africans have come to see journalists and media outlets as beholden to political figures and parties, rather than as servants of the public interest.²⁵ In fact, Conroy-Krutz, “The Squeeze On African” argues that citizens are withdrawing support for media freedom not because they are taking cues from political elites, but because they independently hold an unfavourable view of how media actors conduct themselves and what they produce. Several cross-national studies point to interest in politics and exposure to various news sources (radio, television, newspapers) as determinants of trust in media, while education and exposure to news on the Internet as negatively associated with trust in media.²⁶ However, concerning media independence and quality, Moehler and Singh, “Whose News Do You Trust,” finds that African citizens in post-authoritarian democracies typically prefer public over private media sources, despite the lack of independence and a history of state propaganda, arguing that media quality does not necessarily play a dominant role in the trust gap. These studies underline how the information space affects public opinion of civil society and media actors, and how this can be manipulated and controlled by political elites through harmful discourse or censorship.

Based on this review of the literature, we hypothesize that government repression of freedoms of association and media, understood as the flow of information from political elites to citizens, will be positively associated with public support for enhanced government control over these freedoms. Our first hypothesis is that an increase in government repression of the freedom of association should translate into increased popular support for government control of this freedom, *ceteris parabus*. Furthermore, we hypothesize that increased government control over the media through censorship (which entails repression in the sense of restricting information space) will also result in a decrease of public support for civil society rights.

Hypothesis 1a: Government repression of civil society will be *positively* associated with public support for government control of association freedom.

Hypothesis 1b: Government censorship of media will be *positively* associated with public support for government control of association freedom.

With regards to public support for government control over media freedom, we hypothesize that an increase in government repression of media actors should result

in increased public support for government control of media freedom. We expect both direct and indirect repressive actions as well as open harassment of journalists and media actors to influence public opinion about media freedoms.

Hypothesis 2: Government repression of media actors will be *positively* associated with public support for government control of media freedom.

Data and methods

To determine the relationship between government repression of association and media rights and public support for repression of those rights, we combine data on repression from the Variety of Democracies (V-Dem) dataset Version 11.1²⁷ with three rounds of Afrobarometer survey data covering 37 African countries. Afrobarometer²⁸ is a comparative series of national public opinion polls on questions of democracy and governance in Africa, and is conducted on a regular cycle. It thus offers representative cross-national and cross-sectional information on citizens' attitudes towards democracy. We used data from survey rounds 5–7, covering the years 2011–2013, 2014–2015, and 2016–2018, with a total 151,345 respondents across 37 African countries. Of these three survey rounds, 31 of the 37 countries in the full sample were surveyed in all three rounds (see overview in Appendix A).²⁹

Dependent variables

To measure public support for government control over association and media freedoms, the study relies on two survey questions to which the respondents were asked to select one of two statements closest to their view: one supporting the right of citizens to fully exercise one or the other democratic freedom, and one supporting government's right to exercise control over that freedom. For association freedom, the pro-freedom statement is that “[w]e should be able to join any organization, whether or not the government approves of it,” and the pro-government control statement is that “[g]overnment should be able to ban any organization that goes against its policies.” For media freedom, the pro-freedom is that “[t]he media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control,” and the pro-government control statement is that “[t]he government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it considers harmful to society.” These questions were included in all three Afrobarometer survey rounds.³⁰ For each of these questions, the respondents were probed to answer if they “agree strongly,” “agree,” “agree with neither,” “don't know,” and “refuse to answer” in response to their chosen statement. We combined the responses for “agree strongly” and “agree” for these questions to create our dependent variables, which are measured as binary variables for indicating support for government control. Table 1 offers an overview of the binary responses by survey round.

Independent variables

We used V-Dem's measures of repression of civil society organizations (CSOs) (*v2csreprss*), government censorship of the media (*v2mecenefm*), and harassment of journalists (*v2meharjrn*) as independent variables, all of which are recorded at the country level. CSO repression measures the extent to which the government attempts

Table 1. Description of dependent variables, collected from Afrobarometer Data (2021) and binary coded from Q19 (R5), Q16 (R6), and Q15 (R7) for associational freedom and Q20 (R5), Q17 (R6), and Q17 (R7) for media freedom.

| | Round 5 | Round 6 | Round 7 | Total N |
|---|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Support for government control over CSO association freedom | | | | |
| 1 (support) | 15,511 (30.1%) | 18,056 (33.4%) | 15,614 (34.1%) | 49,181 (32.5%) |
| 0 (non-support) | 34,224 (66.3%) | 34,400 (63.8%) | 28,686 (62.6%) | 97,310 (64.3%) |
| NAs | 1,852 (3.6%) | 1,479 (2.7%) | 1,523 (3.3%) | 4,854 (3.2%) |
| Total responses | 51,587 (100%) | 53,935 (100%) | 45,823 (100%) | 151,345 (100%) |
| Support for government control over media freedom | | | | |
| 1 (support) | 19,112 (37%) | 22,222 (41.2%) | 22,631 (49.4%) | 63,965 (42.3%) |
| 0 (non-support) | 31,056 (60.2%) | 30,394 (56.4%) | 21,940 (47.9%) | 83,390 (55.1%) |
| NAs | 1,419 (2.7%) | 1,319 (2.4%) | 1,252 (2.7%) | 3,990 (2.6%) |
| Total responses | 51,587 (100%) | 53,935 (100%) | 45,823 (100%) | 151,345 (100%) |

to repress civil society organizations. Media repression is measured as (1) the degree to which government directly or indirectly attempts to censor the print or broadcast media, and (2) the degree to which individual journalists are harassed, i.e. threatened with libel, arrested, imprisoned, beaten, or killed, by governmental or powerful non-governmental actors while engaged in legitimate journalistic activities. As the latter variable includes repressive actions by others than governmental actors, we control for political violence exerted by non-governmental actors.

Each of our V-Dem repression measures includes both legal and extra-legal repression of civil society and media actors. Measuring both legal and extra-legal repression is important as government repression and control is exerted not only through formal laws and policies but also through more informal actions. Each indicator is built based on the aggregated values attributed by at least 4 experts and follows a z-distribution from -5 (most repression) to $+5$ (least repression). We rescaled all repression variables so that the highest value represents more repression. The repression measures are furthermore lagged by one year in our statistical models to account for the effects of time and pertain to the year before our measured outcome variable, as we expect repression to have an ex-ante effect on public opinion. All continuous variables included in our models were z-transformed to a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1 (see Table 2).

Control variables

We control for several important influences on public support for association and media freedoms at the individual and country levels of analysis. At the individual level, we include the following covariates from the Afrobarometer survey: gender (coded 1 for female), a logged measure of respondent age, whether respondents live in urban or rural areas (coded 1 for urban), level of education, and self-reported

Table 2. Repression measures included as variables of interest in our models, for all 36 countries over all 8 years.

| Repression | Mean | St. Dev. | Min | Pctl(25) | Median | Pctl(75) | Max |
|----------------|-------|----------|---------|----------|---------|----------|--------|
| of CSOs | 0.000 | 1 | -1.5907 | -0.6601 | -0.2232 | 0.5634 | 2.4385 |
| of media | 0.000 | 1 | -1.9591 | -0.6375 | -0.2389 | 0.6375 | 3.1783 |
| of journalists | 0.000 | 1 | -1.7140 | -0.6150 | -0.1511 | 0.6936 | 2.8423 |

Note: The repression measures *v2csreprss* (CSO repression), *v2mecenefm* (government censorship effort of the media) and *v2meharjrn* (government harassment of journalists) are sourced from the V-Dem dataset, version 11.1 (Coppedge et al. 2021). The measures are rescaled so that higher values reflect more repression and z-transformed to a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.

level of living conditions. These control variables resonate with the tenets of modernization theory, and are commonly included in quantitative analyses of political attitudes and democracy in Africa.³¹

In addition to scholarship on general support for democracy, the reviewed literature on trust in media and NGOs also show how interest in public affairs, exposure to news, and support for and trust in actors and institutions matter for trust in media and CSO.³² To control for active citizenship, we include binary indicators for how often the respondent follows the news and whether he or she is a member of a voluntary association. As radio remains the main news source for most Africans,³³ we include a binary variable indicating frequent radio engagement. We also include a binary measure for associational member – or leadership. In addition, we control for general support of democracy (coded 1 for support) and how much a respondent trusts the ruling party, measured from 0 (Not at all) to 3 (A lot).

Finally, we expect the political environment to impact both respondents' opinions and survey answers. Because most regime measures will be based on how much the government repress media and CSO actors, our main explanatory variables, our models do not include a regime measure per se. In order to control for respondent fear of repressive action for answering the survey truthfully, we included a binary measure of whether the respondent believed that the government sent the survey enumerator or not. This follows Tannenbergh, "The Autocratic Bias," who argues that some survey questions are considered sensitive in more autocratic countries but less so in more democratic countries and uses this question to control for autocratic bias in responses to questions about politically sensitive issues. We expect this variable to work as a greater control in more authoritarian regimes.

In addition, we check for whether the models capture a relationship more prominent in more authoritarian regimes. Appendix D reports two robustness checks. First, we ran our models based on a reduced sample excluding all countries categorized as "closed autocracies" by V-Dem's Regimes of the World measure (*v2x_regime*). As an additional robustness check, we also include in our models other variables to control for whether our results are simply due to different regime characteristics. The results do not change.

At the country level, we include additional V-Dem variables to control for the level of political violence employed by non-state actors against persons (*v2caviol*), ranging from -5 (not at all) to +5 (often), and the degree of freedom of discussion for citizens in private homes and public spaces without fear of harassment (*v2xcl_disc*). We also control for whether the country has experienced an election in the survey year, using a binary measure coded as 1 for the occurrence of either parliamentary (*v2xel_electparl*) and/or presidential (*v2xel_electpres*) elections in a given year. Periods of political competition can influence both repression and popular views about freedoms of association and media, given the key role these rights play in mobilizing citizens during periods of political competition. These variables may simultaneously determine both public opinion about media and CSO actors and government repressive actions, and account for the nature and openness of the political regime.

Furthermore, we control for economic development by employing World Bank data on GDP per capita for each country using data.³⁴ For the models predicting public support for government control over association freedom, we include a measure from the OECD of the amount of official development assistance (ODA)

channelled through non-governmental organizations (NGOs).³⁵ We expect there to be a stronger and more visible presence of NGOs in countries where higher amounts of foreign aid are channelled through these organizations, and for respondents to have a more favourable view of these organizations and association rights as a result.³⁶

Methods and models

To investigate the effect of government repression of democratic rights on the probability of citizens to support such repression, we employed a Generalized Linear Mixed Model with a binomial error structure and logit link function, as our dependent variables are binary.³⁷ We run a series of models to predict popular support for government repression: two models predicting support for government repression of association freedom and one predicting popular support of government repression of media freedom.

For the models predicting support of government repression of association rights, the survey sample covers 125,354 individuals in 36 countries over 8 years, 40,680 of which support government repression (32.5%). For the models predicting support of government repression of media rights, the data covers 125,870 individuals in 36 countries over 8 years, 54,524 of which support government repression (43.3%).

In our models, the dependent variables are on individual level, while the explanatory variables are on country level. Given our theoretical goal of examining how government repression (country level) affects public support (individual level), our multilevel model requires the following specifications. In each of the models, we include repression as a fixed effect because we are interested in the between-country effects. Country and year are included as random intercepts, so as to acknowledge that the individual respondents are nested in countries, which vary over time. This modelling choice allows us to properly account for these two sources of variability in a cross-classified grouping structure.³⁸ In addition, a covariate for year is included as a fixed effect to account for a temporal trend in the model on support for government repression of media freedom (Model 3). Appendix B discusses these model specifications in more detail and reports various model diagnostics and comparisons, such as model stability checks. Appendix C reports results from models with alternative specifications for fixed effects for years, as well as fixed-effects models including country dummies without the hierarchical grouping structure as an additional robustness test to the choice of multilevel models. The models were fitted using the function `glmer` of the R package *lme4* (version 1.1–27.1).³⁹

Results

In [Table 3](#), we present the results of our three models of the relationship between (1) levels of government repression of association and media freedoms, and (2) citizen support for that repression. We first ran null models, which lacked all fixed effects but included the same random effects structure as the full model. For government repression of association rights, the null model shows that about 51.7% of the variance in citizen's support can be attributed to differences between countries and 2.7% between years. For government repression of media freedom, the null model shows that 21.3% of the variance in citizen support can be attributed to differences between countries and 4.7% between years.

Table 3. Results of the logistic multilevel models (GLMM) on citizen's support for government control over (repression of) association freedom (Model 1 and 2) and media freedom (Model 3).

| | Association freedom | | | | Media freedom | |
|--------------------------|---------------------|------------|-----------|------------|---------------|------------|
| | Model 1 | | Model 2 | | Model 3 | |
| | Estimate | Std. Error | Estimate | Std. Error | Estimate | Std. Error |
| (Intercept) | -0.73*** | 0.16 | -0.72*** | 0.16 | -0.13 | 0.09 |
| Fixed effects | | | | | | |
| – Country level | | | | | | |
| CSO repression | 0.12*** | 0.03 | | | | |
| Media censorship | | | 0.08*** | 0.02 | | |
| Journalist harassment | | | | | 0.05** | 0.02 |
| Election year | -0.24*** | 0.02 | -0.24*** | 0.02 | 0.01 | 0.02 |
| Political violence | -0.22*** | 0.04 | -0.20*** | 0.04 | -0.15*** | 0.04 |
| Freedom of discussion | -0.22*** | 0.03 | -0.21*** | 0.04 | 0.03 | 0.03 |
| GDP per capita | 0.46*** | 0.06 | 0.48*** | 0.06 | -0.01 | 0.05 |
| ODA via NGOs | 0.03 | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.04 | | |
| Year | | | | | 0.22*** | 0.03 |
| – Individual level | | | | | | |
| Female | 0.04** | 0.01 | 0.04** | 0.01 | 0.09*** | 0.01 |
| Age | -0.02** | 0.01 | -0.02** | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.01 |
| Urban | -0.07*** | 0.01 | -0.07*** | 0.01 | -0.04** | 0.01 |
| Member of CSO | 0.04** | 0.01 | 0.04** | 0.01 | 0.02 | 0.01 |
| Education level | -0.13*** | 0.01 | -0.13*** | 0.01 | -0.00 | 0.01 |
| Living conditions | 0.09*** | 0.01 | 0.09*** | 0.01 | 0.11*** | 0.01 |
| Support democracy | -0.19*** | 0.01 | -0.19*** | 0.01 | -0.26*** | 0.01 |
| Radio news | -0.05*** | 0.01 | -0.05*** | 0.01 | -0.02 | 0.01 |
| Survey sponsor | 0.12*** | 0.01 | 0.12*** | 0.01 | 0.05*** | 0.01 |
| Trust ruling party | 0.19*** | 0.01 | 0.19*** | 0.01 | 0.20*** | 0.01 |
| Random Effects | | | | | | |
| Country (Variance) | 0.72 | 0.85 | 0.73 | 0.85 | 0.27 | 0.52 |
| Year (Variance) | 0.03 | 0.18 | 0.03 | 0.18 | 0.00 | 0.07 |
| Model diagnostics | | | | | | |
| AIC | 144296.90 | | 144296.29 | | 162982.22 | |
| BIC | 144481.94 | | 144481.33 | | 163167.34 | |
| Log Likelihood | -72129.45 | | -72129.15 | | -81472.11 | |
| Num. obs. | 125,354 | | 125,354 | | 125,870 | |
| Num. groups: | | | | | | |
| Countries | 36 | | 36 | | 36 | |
| Year | 8 | | 8 | | 8 | |

Note: In addition to having country and year as grouping structure (random intercepts) for all models, year is included as a fixed effect in Model 3. Note: All continuous variables are z-transformed to a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. Age (*age_log*), freedom of discussion (*free_disc_log*), GDP per capita (*gdp_per_capita_log*) and ODA via NGOs (*oda_via_ngos_log*) is also log transformed. ' ' $p < 0.1$ ' * ' $p < 0.05$ ' *** ' $p < 0.01$ ' *** ' $p < 0.001$.

As an overall test of the fixed effect of our respective repression measures, we compared the full models with the corresponding null model using a likelihood ratio test. The results are reported in Appendix B and shows that repression has a statistically significant effect in our three models. Overall, as shown in Table 3, in all the models there is a clear impact of the test predictors on the probability of supporting government control over (repression of) civil society and media freedoms (see comparisons of null and full models in Appendix B). Higher levels of government repression are positively associated with a higher probability of citizen support of government control over (repression of) democratic freedoms. These findings support our hypotheses.

In Model 1 we test our first hypothesis, Hypothesis 1a, that government repression of civil society in a country will be *positively* associated with public support for government

repression of association freedom. Here we model the effect of our CSO repression measure on the probability of a respondent supporting government control over (repression of) association freedom. In the second model, Model 2, we test Hypothesis 1b that government censorship of media in a country will be *positively* associated with public support for government control over (repression of) association freedom. Here, we model the effect of media censorship, direct or indirect, on the probability to support government control of association freedom. Our findings are similar to what Lee, Johnson, and Prakash, “Media Independence and Trust,” find in their analysis, that less independent media, i.e. more censorship, leads to less trust in NGO and CSO actors.

In our third and final model, we test Hypothesis 2, that government repression of media actors in a country will be *positively* associated with public support for government control over (repression of) media freedom. Here, we model the effect of harassment of journalists on the probability to support government control of media, controlling for the use of political violence by non-state actors. This part of the analysis most directly examines the effect of repressive behaviour and signalling from political elites.

Indeed, all our included control variables are acting as strong predictors of public support for increased government control. Both election year, degree of political violence and degree of freedom of discussion have strong and significant negative effects on the probability that a respondent will support government control of association rights. For media rights, however, only the degree of political violence in society is significant. The strong control of political violence for Model 3, however, is an important one as the explanatory variable *Journalist harassment* includes harassment by non-state actors. This part of the analysis arguably most directly speaks to the signalling effect of repressive behaviour by political elites, as this includes both governmental or powerful nongovernmental actors. Repressive action might be linked with political elites even though it is not necessarily perpetrated by state-actors themselves.⁴⁰

The marginal effects of the different repression measures in our respective models are plotted in [Figure 2](#). This shows the differentiated average predicted probability in our three models or the change in probability of supporting government control with a standard deviation change of the repression measure, holding all other covariates constant.

The plot illustrates how the effect of repression on the probability of citizens supporting government control over democratic freedoms is greatest, i.e. displays the sharpest increase, with regards to public opinion about association freedom. The change in probability is highest for repression of CSO freedom, in contrast to media censorship or journalist harassment ($B = 0.12$, $SE = 0.03$ for Model 1). This means that higher levels of government repression, both CSO repression and media censorship increase the probability that citizens will support government control over association freedom. There is a smaller effect of repression on citizen views of media freedoms (see the results of Model 3), *ceteris parabis*.

Furthermore, the marginal effects plot shows how the predicted probabilities of citizen support for government control as a function of repression is higher for media freedom than for the two models analysing association freedom. This means that even though an increase in the level of repression of media actors does not translate into an equally strong change in public opinion about media freedom as for association freedom, the predicted probability of citizens supporting government control over media is higher than for CSO freedom.

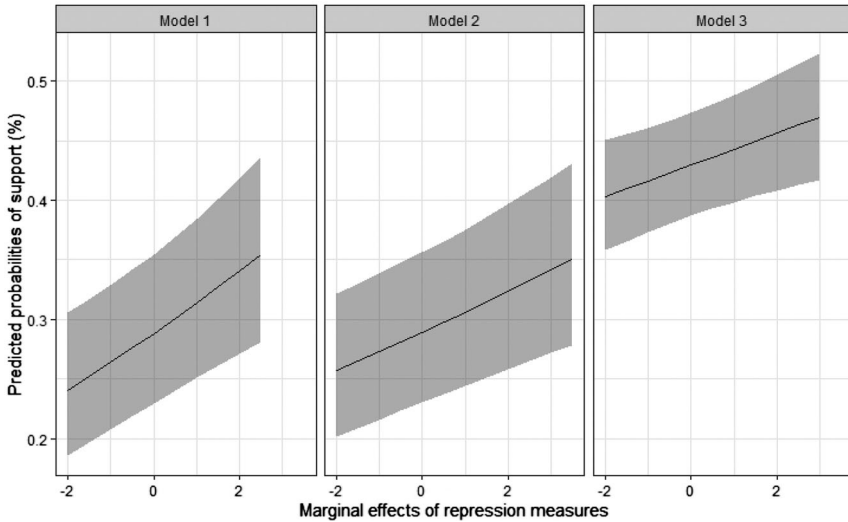


Figure 2. Predicted probabilities of citizen support of government control as a function of repression. Plotted marginal effects of government repression of CSOs for Model 1, government censorship of media Model 2, and harassment of journalists for Model 3. Marginal effects and confidence intervals are calculated by the function `ggpredict` in the `ggeffects` package (Lüdtke 2018), which computes predicted values for all possible levels and values from the respective models' predictors, and are plotted with the `ggplot2` package (Wickham 2016). Note: The repression measures are z-transformed to a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1, which renders the interpretation less intuitive (see Table 2).

Importantly, we hypothesized that government repression would increase public support for government control of media freedom and operationalized this as harassment of journalists including by non-state actors. Controlling for political violence by non-state actors, this part of the analysis follows the “signalling” argument of repression and repressive action from above. However, it should be noted that the public can also sometimes be part of media repression, through harassment and violent attacks on members of the press.⁴¹ Both anti-press violence and anti-press sentiments can stem from limited ideological diversity or lack of independence and professionalization.⁴² Nonetheless, state repression can have a detrimental impact on these issues,⁴³ fuelling anti-press discourse and sentiments and using real issues as pretext for further clamp-down.⁴⁴ This is also connected to the “elite persuasion” argument, where the media are portrayed as political opponents, especially if they engage in rhetorical battles with political leaders when covering controversies.⁴⁵ This can lead to more severe action to silence critics beyond anti-media rhetoric. These are complex and salient issues, emphasized by how public support for government control of media freedom has the highest level and sharpest increase of the two freedoms.

Conclusion

This article investigates the decline in public support for freedoms of association and media in the African context. We analyse the influence of government repression of civil society and media actors on citizen support for enhanced government control over freedoms of association and the media. We suggest that government repression may influence citizens' support for the supply democratic rights by the government

through three potential causal pathways, each of which require further empirical testing: elite persuasion, deference, and familiarity. In line with our theoretical expectations, we show that higher levels of government repression of civil society and media actors are positively associated with public support for government control over these actors and sectors.

Our findings have implications for the study of democracy and the phenomenon of democratic pushback currently taking place in many countries and very visibly so in Africa. Contrary to the claims of politicians and policy makers, our study shows that popular demand for democracy does not exist independently of political context; rather, the government's supply of democracy can and does shape citizen demand for democracy and its constituent freedoms. However, to date, there has been little to no examination of how government repression of democratic rights such as freedoms of association and media impacts public support for those freedoms, particularly in Global South contexts such as Africa. This is despite the ever-growing importance of the question of Africans' desire and support for liberal democracy and for specific, individual democratic freedoms.⁴⁶

While research on the civil society sector has examined the effect that restrictions have had on the NGO sector, like changing the population ecology of the sector⁴⁷ or reducing the flow of foreign aid to organizations,⁴⁸ there has been less focus on the domestic political effects of these restrictions in African states, including on citizens' political beliefs and behaviours. And while there is more research on the relationship between the way in which the media sector operates and public attitudes about the media sector, this research has been oriented more towards understanding how the media sector and information space affects civic life and trust in public institutions.⁴⁹ These knowledge gaps point towards a research agenda on the relationship between government behaviour and citizens' political attitudes in the Global South. While the ability of, and extent to which, citizens' exercise their own political and civil rights, such as freedom of assembly and association or freedom of expression, can reasonably be expected to affect their views on these freedoms, we know little about to what extent and why.

Furthermore, we know little about both how the conduct of civil society and media actors affect public opinion. While some argue that Africans are withdrawing support for democratic freedom due to the faults and flaws of non-state actors' behaviour, this article argues that government behaviour also plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion regarding these actors. A limitation of our study is that our dependent variables are binary measures of whether citizens have chosen to support either the pro-freedom or the pro-government control statement, and as such they cannot capture the balance between regulating versus respecting rights. Unanswered questions here include whether citizens are supporting enhanced government control as a means of regulate unruly actors and sectors, versus support for repression and restrictions of rights. Conroy-Krutz, "The Squeeze On African" argues that the parallel trends in Africa of declining public support for media freedom and a strong public perception of increasing media freedom suggest that Africans want to see their governments push back against media that seem increasingly unfettered. At the same time, we know that government discourse and justifications following this logic is used as pretext for restricting both civil society and media actors. In particular, increasing problems of hate speech and fake news and the spread of misinformation and disinformation on social media may make people discount even reputable information sources and favour the introduction

of media restrictions. Further testing of our theorized three causal mechanisms is, therefore, necessary to identify and confirm pathways of influence.

More research is needed on several additional questions. Does government repression of a given democratic freedom make it more likely for citizens to reduce support for non-repressed freedoms? To what degree does government repression of a given freedom make it easier to repress other freedoms, and do political rulers use reduced public support for one set of democratic freedoms to clamp down on other freedoms? What kind of political elite discourse is most effective in convincing citizens to reduce their support for particular democratic freedoms? What is the impact of reduced public support for freedoms of association and media on various aspects of those sectors – for instance, on donations and funding flows to civil society groups, membership in associational life, public perceptions of civil society organizations and media groups, the quality of journalism, and so on? And finally, does repression-reduced public support impact citizens' political behaviour, such as voting patterns or support for political parties?

Notes

1. Conroy-Krutz and Sanny, "How Free is Too Free"; Logan and Penar, "Are African's Freedoms Slipping Away?"
2. Rakner, "Democratic Rollback in Africa"; Arriola, Rakner, and van de Walle, *Democratic Backsliding in Africa?*
3. Buyse, "Squeezing Civic Space"; Conroy-Krutz, "The Squeeze On African".
4. Conroy-Krutz and Sanny, "How Free is Too Free"; Logan and Penar, "Are African's Freedoms Slipping Away?"
5. de Jager, "Sub-Saharan Africa's Desire".
6. Whitten-Woodring, "Watchdog or Lapdog?"; VonDoepp and Young, "Holding the State at Bay"; Gyimah-Boadi, Logan, and Sanny, "Africans' Durable Demand".
7. Dupuy and Prakash, "Why Restrictive NGO Foreign".
8. VonDoepp and Young, "Holding the State at Bay".
9. Logister, "Global Governance and Civil Society"; Popplewell, "Civil Society, Legitimacy and Political Space"; Whitten-Woodring, "Watchdog or Lapdog?"
10. Buyse, "Squeezing Civic Space"; Conroy-Krutz, "The Squeeze On African".
11. Parks and Thompson, "The Slow Shutdown".
12. Conroy-Krutz, "The Squeeze On African".
13. Claassen, "In the Mood for Democracy?"; Tai et al., "Democracy, Public Support, and Measurement Uncertainty".
14. Knutsen and Rasmussen, "The Autocratic Welfare State".
15. Campbell, "Policy Makes Mass Politics".
16. Brockman and Butler, "The Causal Effects of Elite".
17. Bullock, "Elite Influence on Public Opinion"; Druckman et al., "How Elite Partisan Polarization".
18. Campbell, "Policy Makes Mass Politics"; Campbell, "Policy Feedbacks and the Impact".
19. Chamberlain, "Assessing Enabling Rights".
20. van der Borgh and Terwindt, *NGOs Under Pressure*.
21. Page, "Fake Civil Society".
22. Tannenber, "The Autocratic Bias".
23. Banks, Hulme, and Edwards, "NGOs, States, and Donors".
24. Popplewell, "Civil Society, Legitimacy and Political Space".
25. Conroy-Krutz, "The Squeeze On African"; Gyimah-Boadi and Yakah, "Ghana: The Limits of External".
26. Hanitzsch et al., "Caught in the Nexus"; Stoycheff, "Relatively Democratic"; Tsifti and Ariely, "Individual and Contextual Correlates".

27. Coppedge et al., “V-Dem Codebook v11.1”. V-Dem data can be accessed at <https://www.v-dem.net/>
28. Afrobarometer Data (2021).
29. The Afrobarometer rounds were merged in R using the *retroharmonize* package (Antal et al., “Ex Post Survey”).
30. There is a difference in phrasing of the question for media freedom, where rounds 5 and 6 refer to ‘newspapers’ while round 7 expands this to ‘media’. This is a flaw in our measured variable, as “media” refers to many more, and potentially less professional, forums of media content.
31. Nisbet, Stoycheff, and Pearce, “Internet Use and Democratic”; Mattes and Bratton, “Learning about Democracy in Africa”.
32. Hanitzsch et al., “Caught in the Nexus”; Tsfati and Ariely, “Individual and Contextual Correlates”.
33. Conroy-Krutz and Koné, “Promise and Peril”.
34. Available at <https://data.worldbank.org/>.
35. Available at <https://stats.oecd.org/qwids/>.
36. Lee, Johnson, and Prakash, “Media Independence and Trust”.
37. Baayen, *Analyzing Linguistic Data*.
38. Gill and Womack, “The Multilevel Model Framework”.
39. Bates et al., “Fitting Linear Mixed-Effects Models Using lme4”; The full code for replication, including variable transformations and model checks, is available at the GitHub repository ‘journal_article_decliningsupport’.
40. Conroy-Krutz, “The Squeeze On African”; van der Borgh and Terwindt, *NGOs Under Pressure*.
41. Kellam and Stein, “Silencing Critics”.
42. VonDoepp and Young, “Holding the State at Bay”; Gyimah-Boadi and Yakah, “Ghana: The Limits of External”.
43. Lee, Johnson, and Prakash, “Media Independence and Trust”.
44. Conroy-Krutz, “The Squeeze On African”.
45. Kellam and Stein, “Silencing Critics”; Moehler and Singh, “Whose News Do You Trust?”
46. de Jager, “Sub-Saharan Africa’s Desire”.
47. Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash, “Who Survived?”
48. Dupuy and Prakash, “Do Donors Reduce Bilateral Aid”.
49. Lee, Johnson, and Prakash, “Media Independence and Trust”; Moehler and Singh, “Whose News Do You Trust?”; Stoycheff, “Relatively Democratic”.

Acknowledgements

We thank colleagues at the Department of Comparative Politics at the University of Bergen and at the Chr. Michelsen Institute for valuable feedback in developing this article, especially Lise Rakner and Pauline Lemaire. A special thanks to the anonymous reviewers for constructive and helpful comments. We are also grateful for the financial support of the Research Council of Norway.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Norges Forskningsråd: [grant number 262862].

Notes on contributors

Lisa-Marie Selvik holds a PhD in comparative politics from the University of Bergen, and studies media and civil society rights in the African context.

Kendra Dupuy is a Senior Researcher focusing on civil society and democracy in Africa. She holds a PhD in political science from the University of Washington.

ORCID

Lisa-Marie Selvik  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3442-2765>

Kendra Dupuy  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6508-7712>

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