

RHETORIC AS REPRESSION: THE ROLES AND EFFECTS OF GOVERNMENT FRAMING

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ABSTRACT

During modern protest movements, the regimes targeted by dissidents have issued largely similar kinds of statements about the events. Participants tend to be depicted as national traitors, criminals, or otherwise illegitimate. This project seeks to understand the role such regime rhetoric plays in a government's resistance to protest. I develop a theory that argues that such statements are intentionally designed so as to reduce the amount of support protesters receive from the domestic population and international community by framing them as illegitimate actors. As a result, the government can prevent the growth of protests without relying on costly uses of force. I test the need and capacity for states to carry out this strategy through the level of openness and construction of state-owned media institutions, the relationship between rhetoric and protests, and whether rhetoric reduces the pressure states experience from the international community. I find that transparent states tend to replace state repression with rhetoric, and that this framing allows states to reduce the number of protests. While rhetoric does not change the level of pressure states experience from international organizations, it successfully decreases the amount of pressure that other states bring to bear on a target state.