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*Political Regimes and State-Sponsored Contentious Politics: What’s New?*

**Introduction**

Writing about state-sponsored counter-movements can be done from two different theoretical angles: the perspective of social movement theories on the one hand or concepts of the state and political regimes on the other. Whichever perspective we choose, we will find a plethora of theories, approaches, and concepts on which we can rely. However, the ample and rich literature on social movements or new social movements may be misleading or at least has to be adapted considerably to the phenomenon of state-promoted counter movements.

There are fundamental differences between social movements as part of an independent civil society and GONGOs as (semi-)dependent organizations and creations of the state. Whereas social movements are civic claim makers that emerge outside and against the state (Tilly 1978), counter-movements or GONGOs are parastatal or societal agents that are mandated, created, financed, and supported by the regime or government. They emerge from within the regime and are supposed to serve specific purposes for the state, or its regime and rulers. The classical (new) social movements are both principals and agents in one whereas counter-movements are agents of the state, regime, or particular power factions within it. Whichever one is the direct principal, it is part of the state. Therefore, it might be analytically more promising to look at state-sponsored counter-movements or GONGOs\(^1\) from the perspective of political regimes. The justification for such a perspective comes from the following overarching hypothesis:

**H1:** The inner logic of the political regime and the specific intentions of the ruler to use GONGOs to strengthen the political regime and the power of the incumbent rulers largely determine the emergence, goals, and organizational structure of GONGOs.

To what precise extent GONGOs depend on the state or fulfill purposes for the state depends, among other factors, mainly on the type of political regime they are in or are dependent on. This puts in doubt the heuristic or analytical usefulness of classical social movement literature, from resource mobilization to political opportunity structure theory to contentious politics approaches (see Memos Reichert, Carothers 2015).

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\(^1\) I use the term GONGO as an umbrella term for state-sponsored movements, counter-movements, and organizations.
Types of Political Regimes

There are several approaches to conceptualizing political regimes in order to understand their inner ruling logics. One is to place real existing regimes on a democracy-autocracy continuum (metric scale) between the poles of a perfect democratic and a perfect totalitarian regime. This pays tribute to the unresolved theoretical problem that any dividing line between democracy and autocracy is to some extent arbitrary. Another possibility is to categorize political regimes into specific types. The classical typology comes from Hans Kelsen (1925), who distinguished between autocracy and democracy. Another conventional distinction that became paradigmatic from the 1950s to the 1980s was between democratic, authoritarian, and totalitarian regimes (see Linz 2000). More recent approaches distinguish between democratic, hybrid, and autocratic regimes. Hybrid regimes that combine democratic and autocratic elements are not to be understood as necessarily unstable and transitional, but rather as political regimes that may find their own equilibria and endure (Merkel 2010). Depending on where one draws the dividing lines, hybrid regimes may even be more numerous than autocratic regimes or rule-of-law-based (embedded) democracies.

Figure 1: Types of Political Regimes

Source: Schmotz/Merkel

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2 The placement on a metric scale does not exclude the ex post classification into regime types, as can be seen in the Freedom House, Polity, or Bertelsmann Transformation Indices.

3 In my own calculations I classify 62 countries as liberal (embedded) democracies, 44 as autocratic regimes, and the “rest” as hybrid regimes.
The type of political regime determines the type of GONGO. Nevertheless, this does not rule out commonalities among the latter types. It will be a matter of empirical research whether convergence among GONGOs across regime types will be less pronounced and numerous than those of classical social movements. Below I will indicate by example a few of the relationships between political regimes and GONGOs. They are based on three different types of political regimes in relation to four properties of GONGOs: their purpose (1), structure (2), mode of action (3), and impact on the political regime (4). Needless to repeat, these indications are incomplete and explorative (if not speculative).

Democracy

(1) Purpose

In liberal embedded democracies, the overriding aim of GONGOs should be (and probably is) to strengthen the stability and quality of democracy. The intention is to activate civil society against threats to and enemies of democracy. This is typically the case when the state or its government promotes and sponsors citizens’ initiatives against right-wing or left-wing extremists.

Germany may serve as an example. Governments of the Federal Republic of Germany encourage and support (financially, logistically, and propagandistically) counter-mobilizations and citizens’ initiatives against right-wing extremist groups. These initiatives are labelled: “Kampf gegen Rechts” (Fight the Right). The initiative’s aim is to strengthen civic engagement against neo-Nazi mobilization, since the state does not want to leave such counter-mobilization to the extreme left alone. The initiative is funded by the federal government; similar initiatives are found at the state and municipal levels. These state-sponsored initiatives are supposed to form multiplying cores of networks of civic and cultural circles and demonstrations against neo-Nazi-activities.4 They are meant to contribute to delegitimizing far-right ideas in public discourse. The German example5 may serve as an instance where democratic governments mobilize people in order to strengthen and fortify democracy. In this sense it represents a counterexample to the anti-democratic state involvement against the 1950s and 1960s civic rights movements in the U.S.A.

(2) Structure

In democracies the principal-agent relation between state/government and GONGO appears to be less clear and more blurred than in hybrid or autocratic regimes. The dominant actor might be the government, but can also be political parties or the state as a whole if there is a broad, cross-party

4 The conservative parties want to give less money to and exert greater control over these initiatives, while the other political parties – the Greens, the Social Democrats and the Left – are more generous and less keen on political control.
5 This, of course, has to be understood in the context of the Nazi regime as a unique part of German history.
consensus on the need for GONGOs. Government(s) may sponsor these movements but do not direct them. Since the state considers these initiatives to be part of civil society, it grants them a large degree of autonomy.

(3) Mode of Action

These initiatives have to be peaceful and respect the constitutional and legal rules of the democratic regime. The actions range from informing and enlightening the wider public through youth engagement and education to counter-mobilizations against right-wing demonstrations.

(4) Impact on the Regime

I hypothesize only a weak direct impact of anti-Nazi citizens’ initiatives on the quality and stability of the democratic regime.6 These initiatives, however, may help to strengthen civic awareness of the right-wing threats to democracy. They intensify democratic discourse and delegitimize intolerant, xenophobic, and racist attitudes within the population.

Hybrid Regimes

Hybrid regimes may be of particular interest with regard to the emergence, structure, and systemic impact of GONGOs. Hybrid regimes are especially reliant on covert parastatal counter-mobilizations against political opposition since they rarely command well-organized repressive apparatuses as openly autocratic regimes do and they can only rarely rely on well-functioning bureaucracies and strong civil societies as is often the case in democracies. The use of these covert counter-mobilizations reduces the visibility of repression and its legitimacy costs compared to the exercise of open repression by the state.

(1) Purpose

The main purpose is to keep in check opposition movements, which in hybrid regimes are constitutionally legitimized to oppose those who are in power. Opposition, in other words, cannot simply be suppressed by the state and its security apparatus. Therefore, it becomes the aim of GONGOs to intimidate dissidents, organize counter-rallies, and threaten political parties while keeping the democratic façade intact. In doing so they may isolate the opposition and make them appear to be small minority groups that are not representative of the people as a whole.

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6 This, however, is a hypothesis that needs empirical research to back it up.
2) Structure

GONGOs in hybrid regimes are more dependent on and less autonomous from the state than in democracies. However, they are not, for the most part, subject to strict control. They receive more financial support from the state than do GONGOs in democracies and the state plays a stronger role as principal. Examples are the circulos bolivarianos in Venezuela or the veterans’ organizations in Croatia. It seems that there is a wide range of state-GONGO relations, from the more ad hoc mobilization of the Correa government in Ecuador to the institutional cooptation of large parts of indigenous and other movements under Ivo Morales. Morales’ politics comes closer to the strategy of the democratic Lula government, which successfully created an associational environment in Brazil. Even under the less successful Dilma Rousseff, the state has refrained from instrumentalizing GONGOs against the large anti-government protests of recent years.

Nevertheless, there is almost no systematic empirical research as to under which conditions which type of GONGOs emerges in hybrid regimes, which organizational structures they develop, and to what extents they are controlled by the state. More systematic research is also needed on the question of under which conditions state-mobilized GONGOs can gain autonomy from their former “masters” and become platforms or nuclei for a democratic civil society or, alternatively, become violent and criminal organizations beyond the control of the hybrid regime. The successor states of Yugoslavia or countries in Central or South America may deliver insights into these different developments.

3) Mode of Action

GONGOs in hybrid regimes make use of both legal and extralegal means. It may seem trivial to assert that the more hybrid regimes gravitate towards the authoritarian space of the regime continuum, the more they create counter-movements that also use force against the opposition. In particular, defects in the constitutional dimension of the regime (in contrast to the electoral dimension) open the modes of action to illegal means. This may explain the differences between Venezuela and Bolivia, not to speak of democratic Brazil. Nevertheless, there is no comparative research on the different regime counter-movement nexuses across the varieties of hybrid regimes.

4) Impact on the Regime

Given the lack of systematic empirical research, the following thoughts are of a hypothetical and explorative nature. GONGOs and counter-movements against opposition and democratic movements have become a highly functional element of many hybrid regimes. They can contribute to keeping the opposition at bay and limiting the delegitimizing effects at home and abroad of open regime
repression. If counter-movements use only legal means without resorting to violence, they may even delegitimize and isolate the domestic opposition. If they use limited political violence, on the other hand, they may not contribute to the regime’s legitimacy, but may nonetheless work to hamper opposition from civil society.

**Autocratic Regimes**

One of the distinctive features of totalitarian rule in the first two thirds of the 20th century was hard and massive repression (Hannah Arendt; C.J. Friedrich) combined with ritualized mass political participation, whereas authoritarian rule often followed patterns of social and political demobilization often combined with arbitrary modes of hard repression. These modes of autocratic rule have changed during the last three decades, as electoral authoritarianism has become the standard form of dictatorial rule.

In a research project on the question “Why do dictatorships survive?” a team at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center concluded in a large-n statistical analysis that after 1945, neither economic performance, nor elite cooptation, nor hard repression mattered most for the survival of autocratic regimes. Rather, it was soft repression that turned out to be the most effective tool of autocratic rulers in stabilizing their rule. The reason seems to be that soft repression has few non-intended consequences, avoids blame, and does not require many resources.

(1) **Purpose**

GONGOs are the more sophisticated strategic answers of electoral authoritarian regimes for reducing opposition while maintaining some degree of national and international legitimacy in the globalized world of the 21st century. They are certainly not the only instrument for countering the activities of the regime opposition. Secret police, a regime-loyal judiciary, and the open threat of state repression still play an important role. The more autocratic a regime, the more widespread is the official repression of the state.\(^7\) GONGOs, however, serve the function of complementing more direct forms of state repression from the societal side.

(2) **Structure**

In autocratic regimes, the state is the principal and GONGOs are the agents. The space for autonomous activities is strictly limited. Some autocratic regimes still rely on state-controlled mass organization or religious networks. GONGOs in autocratic regimes are closer than those in hybrid or democratic regimes to the traditional communist or fascist mass organizations of the 20th century.

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\(^7\) The statement is admittedly not free of tautology since the intensity of repression is one of the core features that distinguish political regimes, in particular hybrid from autocratic ones.
Compared to the classical Leninist or fascist mass organization, however, the sponsoring of state-inspired anti-opposition contentious politics and movements is a less controlled and controllable process for the state and may develop its own dynamic, even reviving societal activism, providing new arenas for political action, and decentralizing social policy.

(3) Mode

The political action of GONGOs does not have to be more violent than that in autocratic regimes. My assumption is that they may rather use even less violence because they are better controlled (less “spontaneous” and “eruptive” violence) since repression is often organized by official state organs. In autocratic regimes with strong stateness GONGOs may be “licensed” by the regime to support public administration implementing public policies, as it is the case in China. However, a more systematic comparison of different types of autocratic regimes is required to gain more than anecdotal insights into the different modes of GONGOs political action.

(4) Effects

I assume that the type of autocratic regime (military, monarchical, one-party regime, electoral authoritarian) is considerably germane to which kind of GONGOs emerge, which purposes they serve, and what impact they have on the stability of the regime. GONGOs may have major stabilizing effects in well-organized one-party regimes compared to under-bureaucratized military regimes that may not be able to control the GONGOs and their potential quest for more autonomy. Also electoral authoritarian regimes do not control the opposition completely. GONGOs may develop a more independent stance and link to parts of the opposition, and thus generate destabilizing effects for the regime’s stability as well.

Needless to repeat it again here: These are hypotheses and assumptions that have some plausibility derived from the inner power logic of the different regimes. But only more systematic empirical research can “test” whether these assumptions find evidence in real existing regimes.
### Table 1: Political Regimes and GONGOs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regime type</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Effects</th>
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| Democracy    | • Strengthening democracy  
• Isolating anti-democratic movements/trends | • Strengthening civic organization  
• Funding initiatives  
• Occasionally | • Legal  
• Non-violent  
• Initiatives and manifestations | • Discriminating anti-democratic initiatives/movements  
• Influencing public discourse  
• Strengthening civil society: Associational environment  
• Minor effects on democratic regime |
| Hybrid regime | • Strengthening present government/ruler  
• Intimidating opposition  
• Cooperating with donors  
• Consolidating hybrid regime | • Movements/circles  
• Paramilitary groups  
• Death squadrons  
• temporary | • Violent  
• Manifestations | • Weakening opposition  
• Keeping legal/democratic façade of the regime  
• Stabilizing impact on hybrid character of the regime |
| Autocratic regime | • Strengthening autocratic regime  
• Organizing society  
• Controlling society  
• Fighting opposition  
• Cooperating with donors  
• Implementing of specific policies | • Mass organizations  
• State-controlled  
• Death squadrons  
• Permanent | • Violent  
• Manifestations  
• Administration | • Control over society  
• Ritual participation  
• Medium impact on autocratic regime |

### References