

# All Repression is Local: The Sub-national Determinants of Physical Integrity Rights Abuse\*

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## Abstract

Why do we observe different levels of respect for human rights in different regions of the same country? Why are citizens' human rights generally uniformly protected (or abused) within the borders of some countries while within other countries these rights are upheld in some locations and severely restricted in others? Prior research investigating patterns of human rights protection and violation has typically treated states as centralized decision-makers and examined state respect for human rights as a single, countrywide phenomenon. This approach masks important variations in the actors perpetrating abuses, motives for the abuse, targets of the abuse, and severity of abuse. We propose that cross-national human rights researchers must break their focus on the country as the unit of analysis and look at the sub-national characteristics of repressive behaviors. We argue that antigovernment dissent encourages government agents to respond with repression. However, this response is particularly likely when government power is highly decentralized, when the dissent takes place far from the national capital, and when the local government is largely incapable of controlling its repressive agents. We test this theory using an original dataset that represents the first attempt to document the level of repression at the subnational level for a global sample of countries over space and time.

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