

PRO-GOVERNMENT COUNTER-PROTESTS IN DEMOCRACIES – WHY THEY ARE UNLIKELY TO HAVE FAVORABLE OUTCOMES

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Abstract: The 2010s and 2020s have seen a surge in protest activities in a multitude of countries around the globe. Many of the protests have targeted incumbent parties and on a number of occasions have spiraled into revolutions or even protracted conflicts, which have taken the shape of civil wars and even seen the involvement of third states. While the motivations behind political protests have in many cases been analyzed at length, a significantly less explored topic concerns the somewhat related phenomenon of counter-protests – demonstrations that oppose the goals of the original protest movements and are often in favor of the ruling governments – as well the nature of the interactions between demonstrations and counter-demonstrations. The paper employs a qualitative methodology, which entails the integrated analysis of a selection of secondary sources within the social sciences. It fulfils three primary objectives. Firstly, it argues that organizing counter-protests is on the vast majority of occasions a gamble that is unlikely to pay off for governments in consolidated and semi-consolidated democracies. On the one hand, while in authoritarian regimes counter-protests may have a deterrence effect by signaling the strength of the ruling autocrats, in democratic countries they are unlikely to successfully mask government weaknesses, unless the participants in them very clearly outnumber the people who original protests. Secondly, counter-protests may invite further violence and civil disorder or raise concerns that the democratically elected government is losing its monopoly on violence in society, which is not a good look with regard to the credibility of any government. Thirdly, counter-protests may find it especially difficult to satisfy the standard of authenticity because they are almost by definition a reaction to an ongoing protest activity that is usually perceived by the silent majority of people (who do not physically involve themselves in protest activities) to be motivated by at least a partially legitimate cause. The article also briefly examines two instances of counter-protests in Egypt and Bulgaria in order to illustrate the abovementioned points. Thus, in a political climate in which conviction politicians and protesters who are committed to their cause are as a rule viewed with acclaim, counter-protests that are organized in a top-down fashion may only serve to further reduce the legitimacy of the incumbent government.

Keywords: protests, counter-protests, United States, Eastern Europe, Egypt

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the major trends in politics and society that since the second half of the 2000s seems to apply to virtually every corner of the world concerns the increase in major protest activities. According to an extensive survey carried out by the Initiative for Policy Dialogue and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, in 2006 there were 59 significant protests all over the world while in 2013 almost twice that number of demonstrations occurred during the first six months of the year. Since 2010, the average size of protests has been climbing at a steeper rate than in the preceding years. (Carothers & Youngs, 2015) According to Varieties of Democracy, the share of countries with large pro-democracy mass protests rose from 27% in 2009 to 44% in 2019, with pro-democracy demonstrations leading to the democratization of more than 20 countries over the course of the 2010s. (Lindtstaedt, 2021) The COVID-19 pandemic and especially the government measures taken to combat the spread of the virus arguably also resulted in a proliferation of protest activities during the early 2020s, possibly due to the social isolation managing to unlock certain pent-up frustrations, with anti-lockdown and racial justice demonstrations coming under the spotlight in the United States. (Demsas, 2024) What is worth emphasizing is that over the last 20 years protests have targeted all types of political regimes and politicians in established democracies can no longer feel as if they have been inoculated against the threat of mass demonstrations. The resurgence in protest activities can be attributed to the transformations ushered in by communication technologies that have made information more readily available to potential protest participants, (Hussain & Howard, 2013) the post-material motivations connected to new social movements, which are dominated by newly emerging middle classes and emphasize cultural and identity-based issues, the feeling that democratic systems have not lived up to the initial expectations, and the rapid growth in the number of civil society organizations around the world. (Carothers & Youngs, 2015) As a reaction to the conventional types of protests, counter-protests have also on a multitude of occasions become part of the political landscape. (Shahin, 2022) For the purposes of this article, a counter-protest is defined as a demonstration that starts as a response to another protest (that is often explicitly anti-government) and which accordingly pursues aims that are diametrically opposed to those advocated for by the original protesters and is often in favor of the authorities that are confronted by the initial protest activities. While counter-protests are not necessarily a new phenomenon,

protest-counterprotest dynamics have intensified at least since the late 2010s, which has been reflective of the increasing amount of social polarization within countries, (Reynolds-Stenson & Earl, 2018) and they have accordingly been attracting an increasing amount of scholarly attention. (Shahin, 2022) It needs to be taken into account that pro-government mobilization, which can often be viewed as a hallmark of a counter-protest, is at the highest level in single-party and military regimes followed by multiparty ones while it plays a rather minor role in monarchies, as the latter generally are not that inclined to legitimize their power through mass support. (Hellmeier & Weidmann, 2020) There are a number of underlying logics and motivations, which are behind the decisions of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes that feel vulnerable as a result of demonstrations directed against them to encourage or even actively organize counter-marches. On the one hand, counter-protests may have a signaling function because they provide some indication as to the degree of support for the status quo and in certain contexts may dissuade a number of potential protesters, especially those who perceive themselves as somewhat on the fence when it comes to the issues in question, from participating in an anti-government demonstration. (Barbera & Jackson, 2016) With regard to the notion of conveying a certain message, such counter-demonstrations may also be a thinly veiled threat directed at opposing elites, attempting to convince them that the mood among the members of the general public does not provide fertile ground for any potential attempts to stage a coup d'état from above. In essence, pro-government counter-protests seek to portray the authorities as sufficiently strong and well-poised to withstand political challenges. (Hellmeier & Weidmann, 2020) Secondly, the attendees of pro-government rallies may engage in an uneasy tango (Ellinas & Lamprianou, 2024) with their anti-government counterparts, interfering with the organization of the anti-regime protests by deliberately choosing to hold their events in the same time slots and occupying attractive protest venues, thus reducing the opportunities for anti-government demonstrators in terms of them being able to gather in numbers at sites that have a special cultural and symbolic significance. (Hellmeier & Weidmann, 2020) Thirdly, pro-government demonstrations may also become unofficial instruments of repression because violent counter-demonstrations may increase the perceptions of individual risk associated with participation in anti-government protests. They can be regarded as a way of out-sourcing or delegating the suppression of dissent. (Ibid) The underlying logic is that in the case of such type of coercion, there is some degree of plausible deniability to the authorities' actions, which in theory would permit them to enjoy a more favorable position in terms of their domestic and international legitimacy. (Zurabashvili, 2021) Furthermore, clashes between pro- and anti-government citizens may provide a powerful justification for the government to eventually step in and mete out harsh punishments by making full use of its repressive apparatus. This paper argues that counter-protests in multiparty states, which include unconsolidated and consolidated democracies, are as a rule not likely to be beneficial from the standpoint of the authorities and may actually result in a multitude of negative unintended consequences. Firstly, due to a number of characteristics of the political environment that are applicable to most democratic countries, they do not have a particularly useful signaling function in terms of putting on a convincing show of strength for the incumbent government. Secondly, unless the government is quite adept at managing the interactions between protesters and counter-protesters, it may invite additional pressure on itself, especially from the people who initially perceive themselves as neutral and do not feel like taking part in the protest, due to raising trepidations that it is a major part of the problem rather than part of the solution with regard to the potential occurrence of civil strife and extreme polarization in across the wider society. Thirdly, with counter-protests in democracies there is almost always the distinct possibility of them being framed as lacking authenticity, as they are often likely to be appraised as not being as genuine as the original demonstrations in terms of the manifested grievances (if there are any mentioned at all), which may further erode the legitimacy of the government or governing coalition

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper employs a qualitative approach and has selected an unobtrusive research method. Thus, the article is primarily reliant on desk research, (Cheong et al., 2023) systematically reviewing a variety of existing sources of data, including academic papers, policy memos, opinion polls, and newspaper reports, many of which cover a wide range of topics in political science. In accordance with the philosophy of qualitative research synthesis, (Drisko, 2019) the information that is obtained is synthesized and subjected to rigorous analysis by the author, with the purpose of generating new data, providing a fresh and in-depth understanding of the subject area as well as paving the way for out-of-the-box thinking with regard to the issues that are covered. There is a constant interplay of theory and data, with the data collection being an iterative process and encompassing a number of stages. The actual data sampling concludes once the analytical saturation point is reached and no further insights are likely to emerge. (Weed, 2005) Because of the inductive nature of the study, it refrains from being bound by the formulation and validation of a concrete hypothesis. (L. Haven & Van Grootel, 2019)

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As discussed previously in relation to authoritarian regimes that are facing certain challenges emanating from counter-elites or regular citizens with anti-government views, counter-protests may be beneficial due to a number of reasons, which relate to the calculated projection of strength that may have a deterrence effect, the possibility of direct interference with the activities of the original protesters by limiting their options with regard to the use of physical space, potentially making them less visible to the wider public, and even by using them as informal agents of repression. However, it is dubious to what extent governments of democratic states will be in a good position to derive benefits from these features that are typically associated with counter-protests.

Firstly, in the case of an established or even a flawed democracy there are reasons to be skeptical that a counter-protest (unless it clearly reflects the majority opinion or is undoubtedly comparable in terms of the citizen turnout to the original protest) will be able to send the right type of signal to the wider society. Unlike in one-party states where accurate information pertaining to the true popularity of the regime may successfully be kept under wraps, the citizens of democratic countries are always likely to have at least a rough idea in which direction the winds are blowing when it comes to the public mood, in part due to having access to reliable opinion polls and being able to discuss political matters relatively freely with fellow citizens in a variety of different settings. Thus, a counter-protest would not be very effective as an obfuscation strategy and in terms of bringing about an information mist that could dissuade initially neutral citizens from joining the protest movement. Furthermore, the signaling purpose of counter-protests may turn out to be superfluous if the aim is to discourage competing elites from taking direct action against the government because coup d'états orchestrated by anti-government elites are rarely part of the usual political *modus operandi*, especially in consolidated democracies. It is (depending on the exact nature of the political system) the vote of no-confidence that constitutes the primary mechanism, which can result in the toppling of a government or governing coalition. Even though only around 3 to 5% of the votes of no-confidence in advanced parliamentary democracies are successful in terms of the termination of governments, (Tuttnauer & Hazan, 2023) any efforts put forth in organizing a counter-protest may be better directed towards securing the support of important coalition partners and political allies rather than projecting an image of strength on the streets. Also, another problem that emerges is that governments in democratic states may actually be held legally accountable if a counter-demonstration causes certain inconveniences to the anti-government protesters. According to the minimal concept of democracy, freedom of expression and peaceful assembly constitutes one of the primary dividing lines between democratic and non-democratic regimes. (Zurabashvili, 2021) Even if the state does not explicitly interfere with a lawful protest, not taking certain proactive measures for the purpose of allowing genuine and effective freedom of assembly may cause it to fall short in terms of fulfilling certain legal obligations. (European Court of Human Rights, 2024). Thus, a government that is already in a difficult situation with regard to its perceived internal legitimacy may open itself to criticism from abroad if a counter-protest is seen as interfering with an anti-government rally. Interestingly, there is also some tacit evidence from Germany that counter-mobilization may actually not be particularly effective when it comes to having dampening effects (e.g. in terms of reducing the number of participants) on right-wing protests that eschew liberal and progressive causes. (Vüllers & Hellmeier, 2021) Essentially, this can be regarded as a further confirmation that citizens of democracies, even those who may actually sympathize with authoritarian values and should in theory be more easily coerced by intimidation tactics associated with non-democratic governments, generally do not allow themselves to be impressed by physical shows of force by the opposing side and may implicitly recognize that the right to protest is a fundamental one.

Secondly, even though the correlation between the existence of strong democratic institutions (typical of established democracies) and the onset of civil war is by far a negative one, (Piccone, 2017) some studies suggest that when controlling for GDP per capita and certain additional criteria pertaining to levels of socio-economic development, democratically governed countries are not at a lower risk of internal armed conflict than authoritarian ones. Moreover, possibly due to the stronger constraints on the use of repression against insurgents, democracies tend to have longer internal wars, (Hegre, 2014) so once there is a serious escalation when it comes to intra-societal political violence, it may be more difficult for the authorities to regain control. A strategy that is premised upon paving the ground for showdowns between opposing forces on the streets may raise societal concerns about the ushering in of a potential scenario resembling a civil conflict, especially given that one of the paramount duties of democratic governments is to reduce political violence within the state. Major flare-ups that start to involve militant citizens with apparently irreconcilable political differences may result in the government starting to lose the support of both the silent majority of people who are neither explicitly pro- nor anti-protest as well as the national police (in theory expected to be a neutral force in countries with democratic credentials), which would further reduce its policy options. In essence, democratically elected leaders are forced to walk a tightrope between encouraging their own staunch supporters and maintain the façade of looking out for the country as a whole, otherwise the counter-protest may simply become an additional and unpredictable burden that will be hard shoulder. It is safe to assume that even

if Donald Trump was not the “proximate cause” of (Klarman, 2025) and had provided only implicit encouragement to the Stop the Steal rally protesters (who can in some respects be considered to fit the definition of pro-government counter-protesters due to their advocacy for the incumbent administration at the time), some of whom played a major part in the United States Capitol attack on January 6, 2021, he would have still faced a slip in his approval rating and attracted strong criticisms due to a perceived failure to condemn political violence (Gramlich, 2022) and not doing enough for reinforcing the guardrails of democracy. In the months and years following the January 6 Capitol breach experts have raised the specter of post-election violence in the USA, (Wilson, 2024) with an October 2024 The Times-YouGov survey revealing that approximately a quarter of Americans (with virtually no differences in that regard between Trump and Harris supporters) believed that the upcoming election was very likely or somewhat likely to cause a second civil war. (Charter, 2024)

Thirdly, as pointed out in the introductory part, counter-protests are as a rule associated with authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes, so in consolidated and flawed democracies they tend to be viewed as not exactly representative of the views of the citizens. Framing theory stipulates that social movements are reliant on collective action frames in order to communicate their aims, disagreements as well as the proposed solutions they have in mind. The ways in which movements frame their issues has a strong influence on public perceptions, the type of narratives that are espoused by journalists, and mobilization capacity. (Hussain, 2024) Unless the counter-protesters are quite numerous and clearly organized from the bottom-up with preferably a decentralized leadership, they would have a hard time laying a convincing claim to authenticity and winning the battle of ideas, as a result of which they risk being placed in the undesirable category of professional demonstrators from the perspective of the citizens who are mostly neutral or non-committal when it comes to the protests. Also, because protests usually have a positive connotation and are almost universally associated with either economically downtrodden people or idealists who are willing to stand up for fairness, equality and justice, a counter-protest is often easy to be tarred with the anti-progressive brush and portrayed as an endeavor intended to stifle free speech. With regard to the emphasis on liberal values and progressivism, in many developed countries (that are also liberal democracies or approach liberal democratic standards) the citizens who are more politically active and may be more inclined to engage in protests against the government are likely to have a dominant presence in the capital city, (Jackman & Goodfellow, 2024) so counter-protesters may in some instances need to be transported to the capital from more geographically peripheral or rural locations in the country, which would only further bolster the narrative that they are little more than pawns for the authorities or are simply paid protesters.

Two short case studies can be considered instructive in terms of the underlying dynamics described above.

In June 2023, massive protests that reportedly involved millions of participants across the whole of Egypt, (Kingsley, 2013) though the numbers may have been significantly overestimated, (Champkin, 2013) which were mainly led by the youth Tamarod movement, erupted against conservative president Mohammed Morsi who had an affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni Islamist religious and political movement. In turn hundreds of thousands of pro-Morsi supporters staged counter-demonstrations under the banner of their own Tagarod campaign. (Maher, 2013) Eventually the Egyptian army, the then Commander-in-Chief who was current Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, was not swayed by the show of force by the counter-demonstrators and decided to side with the anti-Morsi crowd, deposing the president on 3 July 2013. While there may not be a full consensus when it comes to this designation, in the period between the 2011 Egyptian Revolution (that resulted in the resignation of autocratic president Hosni Mubarak) and the end of Morsi’s presidency in the summer of 2013, Egypt possibly satisfied some of the conditions for it to be considered at least a flawed democracy due to the competitive presidential election held, the removal of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces from power and the relative freedom of speech enjoyed by the Egyptian citizens. (Puddington, 2013) In terms of the theoretical considerations mentioned in the previous paragraph, the Muslim Brotherhood counter-protests in favor of Morsi were certainly authentic and had an organic energy to them (with many of his supporters willing to sacrifice their lives to support their president prior, during and in the aftermath of the coup, with more than 1000 people perishing in the Rabaa massacre on 14 August 2013 when the Egyptian authorities used lethal force to disperse sit-ins of pro-Morsi protesters at two sites in Cairo), (Holmes & Baoumi, 2016) though keeping in mind the urban-rural divides in politics, (Aspden, 2012) the true powerbase of Morsi’s support was certainly in the rural areas and not so much in the capital itself. (Rohac, 2013) However, even though they certainly did not lack numbers, they were unable to offset the perceptions regarding the strength of the regime, which were probably shaped by the army’s messaging and opinion polls around the time of the events, which indicated that most Egyptians were opposed to Morsi. (Elshinnawi, 2013) Perhaps even more significantly, the beleaguered Egyptian government under Morsi was unable to satisfy the second requirement – in the days preceding the coup there were violent clashes between anti- and pro-Morsi demonstrators, resulting in fatalities, with some prominent Muslim Brotherhood politicians using threatening language to dissuade potential anti-Morsi protesters, notably those belonging to the Coptic community, from involvement in the protests.

(Armanios, 2013) Thus, in the Egyptian case the combustible mixture created by the nature of the interactions between the two types of protests, increasing the general fears of a deterioration in the security situation and a possible descent into a civil war, may have at least in part influenced the decision of the Egyptian army to remove Morsi from power. In short, two out of the three factors traditionally associated with the success of counter-protests in authoritarian regimes were either not met or even had a backfire effect.

Moving on to Eastern Europe, during the same summer of 2023 protests began in Bulgaria against the government of Plamen Oresharski, which was a coalition one formed by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), following the National Assembly's June 2023 decision (with the votes provided by the members of Parliament from the two coalition parties) to elect politician and oligarch Delyan Peevski as head of the State Agency for National Security (DANS). (Bilefsky et al., 2013) After the protest activities did not subside as a result of the reversal of the Peevski appointment, political figures with sympathies to the government began to organize counter-protests. (Leviev-Sawyer, 2013) What is notable is that in this particular case, similarly to the Egyptian one, only one of the three factors conducive to fruitful counter-protests went the authorities' way – there were no instances of clashes between the counter-protesters and the anti-government demonstrators, which could have sparked fears of a wider political turmoil in Bulgaria. (Meznik, 2016) However, the two other criteria discussed above were not fulfilled – Bulgarians were not at any point under the illusion that the counter-protests enjoyed comparable degree of popular support to the anti-Oresharski demonstrations and they never really helped constrain the options for the other protesters by being able to congregate in significant numbers in the vicinity of any symbolic landmarks in Sofia. Also, the claims that the counter-protesters were especially committed to their cause never appeared credible from the standpoint of the wider society, as they were organized in a top-down fashion, with persisting allegations of monetary incentives being provided to the counter-protest participants. Notably, concerns about counter-protests were never on the radar when the government's junior coalition partner, the MRF, withdrew its support in June 2024, which essentially sealed its fate, leading to its resignation in July. (Brown, 2014) Thus, it is very difficult to make the case that the counter-protesters played an important role in terms of easing the pressure on the government and improving its prospects to continue to govern the country. A somewhat similar example from a neighboring Balkan country could be found in the case of Serbia. On 8 May 2023, following a Belgrade school shooting and a shooting spree in the villages of Dubona and Malo Orašje earlier in the month, protests began in Serbia against the issue of violence in society. President Aleksandar Vučić and other government officials largely dismissed them as politically charged, viewing them as being stoked by the political opposition for the purpose of assuming power. The Serbian government and the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) eventually organized their own counter-protest (held on 26 May), which involved transporting government supporters to Belgrade from various parts of Serbia as well as from Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This pro-government rally and what were perceived to be vitriolic remarks uttered by Vučić *against the opposition during his participation in it* only hardened the resolve of the demonstrators, which became even more uncompromisingly anti-government in their stances. (Ivković, 2025)

In the summer of 2013 both Egypt and Bulgaria (which was actually arguably closer to a consolidated democracy) could be considered to have ticked many boxes in terms of satisfying the criteria for at least defective democracies and in both countries the authorities' decisions to organize counter-protest activities either worsened the situation or failed to move the needle in terms of consolidating their positions.

4. CONCLUSION

Counter-protests certainly have their uses when it comes to propping up authoritarian regimes that may be hurtling towards a collapse, but even in the case of countries where the ruling elite is able to exercise information control and has plenty of repressive options at its disposal, they need to be used sparingly and strategically in order to produce the desired effects from the standpoint of the authorities. The possibility of blowback always remains in the picture and counter-gatherings, even if they include a substantial number of participants, are by no means the most foolproof way of safeguarding authoritarianism. In the case of consolidated and flawed democracies counter-protests are likely to pose plenty of challenges for the governments that are tempted to make use of them and in addition to involving a significant expenditure of resources, they may also alienate segments of society that are originally willing to give the authorities a pass. This is due to a combination of factors pertaining to the ways of signaling strength in democracies, the expectation that the government should be a guardian of social harmony in the country as a whole and the uphill battle that often needs to be fought in order for the counter-protests to be portrayed as exhibiting true authenticity. Thus, it is not surprising that there appear to be few examples of the successful use of counter-protests from the standpoint of incumbent governments in consolidated and incomplete democracies. Nonetheless, it is not totally out of the question that at some point in the future an astute political entrepreneur may be in a position to establish a bona fide blueprint for the appropriate channeling of counter-protests in non-

authoritarian states, though he or she will have a real mountain to climb in terms of meticulously evaluating and assigning proper weight to a vast amount of variables.

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