

# Contentious Compliance

Dissent and Repression under International  
Human Rights Law

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August 23, 2018

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# Part I

## Introduction

# Chapter 1

## Acknowledgments

The progress of science relies on community. We build on the careful work of other scholars. We present our research publicly, opening it to critique, suggestion, and improvement. We depend on organizations and universities for the time, space, and resources to think, process, write, fail, and succeed. We lean on a community of colleagues—from graduate school advisors to senior colleagues, from friends in the discipline to editors who support the research—for advice and encouragement. We contribute to the community, adding our ideas to the body of knowledge in the hopes they will assist others in proving us wrong and thinking differently about social scientific outcomes. We thank our community here.

### 1.1 Professional acknowledgments

The two of us first met in 2008 at a small workshop on courts and human rights organized by Will Moore and Jeff Staton and sponsored by Florida State University and Emory University. Although the workshop was filled with prominent senior scholars (many of whom we thank below), this finally-forthcoming project developed in pajamas and over the course of car rides, as FSU graduate student Courtenay hosted Emory graduate student Emily on an air mattress for the duration of the conference. Thank you, Will and Jeff, for starting us on a

journey that will endure throughout our careers.

Like all good graduate students, we finished our respective dissertations before we really got started on this project, which began with a puzzle and a model and grew from there. The formal theory and its implications for government repression were published in the *Journal of Politics* in 2013. The implications and evidence for mobilized dissent were published in the *Review of International Organizations* in 2016 after being awarded the Best Paper in International Relations at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association in 2012. A public presentation of some of the arguments contained in this book were published in *The Washington Post's* Monkey Cage Blog in 2017. We appreciate the editors and reviewers that examined, attacked, dismantled, praised, and improved these manuscripts—including at the many journals where they were rejected. Thank you, especially, to Oxford University Press, our editor David McBride, and three very helpful anonymous reviewers. Reviewing even a portion of a book manuscript is no small task, and we appreciate everyone's efforts toward making this one better.

So many of the ideas contained in this book—its concepts, interpretations, scope, alternatives, relationships, and examples—emerged from the variety of scholars to whom we have presented this project in its various forms. In addition to refining the arguments with our colleagues at the University of California, Merced, we shared it in conferences, online workshops, graduate seminars, and invited research talks, benefiting from new questions and ideas all the while. Thank you to the participants in seminars at Binghamton University; the State University of New York at Buffalo; the University of California, Berkeley; the University of California, Merced; Duke University; Emory University; Florida State University; George Washington University; Universität Hamburg; the University of Illinois; the University of Indiana; the University of Iowa; the London School of Economics; the University of Maryland; the University of Michigan; the University of Mississippi; the University of Nebraska; the University of Pennsylvania; Pennsylvania State University; the University of Pittsburgh; Princeton University; Rice University; the University of South Carolina;

Texas A&M University; the University of Texas; Texas Tech University; Stanford University; Vanderbilt University; and Yale University. Thank you also to conference participants at Princeton University, the MultiRights Summer Institute at the University of Oslo, Political Economy of International Organizations, Visions in Methodology, and the annual meetings of several national and international political science organizations.

In Spring 2016, we hosted a book conference at the University of California, Merced. Although we promised our participants California sunshine, it rained for the duration, including during a postworkshop visit to Yosemite National Park. Over the course of that rainy weekend, we were fortunate to have some extremely intelligent, creative, and generous scholars tear our project down and then build it back up again. Thank you to Kathleen Cunningham, James Hollyer, Yon Lupu, Heather Elko McKibben, Will Moore, Jeff Staton, and Scott Wolford for making the trip to Merced and bringing with them their very best ideas to shape our manuscript. All of our colleagues and graduate students at UC Merced went out of their way to make our guests feel welcome, especially Peter Carey, Jared Oestman, and Ae-sil Woo, who took detailed notes and helped with conference logistics; Tom Hansford, who ably led our raincoat-clad group through Yosemite Valley; and Nate Monroe and Darick Ritter, who offered us logistical and psychological support in our attempts to feed and house our colleagues for several days. Book conferences are expensive; we are grateful to the Political Science Department, the School of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts at UC Merced, and the Tony Coehlo Endowed Chair of Public Policy for funding the workshop.

Many generous mentors and colleagues offered us their time and expertise in the form of invaluable comments, critiques, and discussions on various parts of this manuscript. Prior to the book workshop, Christian Davenport, Emilie Hafner-Burton, and Jeff Staton served as members of a book advisory committee, commenting on chapters and offering counsel about the book publishing process. In addition to the people named above—many of whom we could thank in every paragraph of our acknowledgments—we benefitted from the expertise and thoughtful suggestions of Paul Almeida, Phil Arena, Sam Bell, Tom Clark, Chad Clay,

Jackie DeMeritt, Chris Fariss, Doug Gibler, Sona Golder, Julia Gray, Larry Helfer, Danny Hill, Yukari Iwanami, Amanda Licht, Carolina Mercado, Amanda Murdie, Monika Nalepa, Rob O'Reilly, Hong Min Park, Cesare Romano, Beth Simmons, Jens Steffek, Chris Sullivan, Jay Ulfelder, Johannes Urpelainen, Jana von Stein, Erik Voeten, Jim Vreeland, Geoff Wallace, Jim Walsh, and Joe Young. Extra special thanks to Yon Lupu, Will Moore, and Scott Wolford, who read more bad and decent drafts of the articles and book manuscript than a person should ever have to do for a colleague or friend. We are grateful to Ellen Cutrone, Jeanette Hencken, Daniel Hoffmann, and Susan Navarro Smelcer for copyediting the manuscript at its interim stages and to Heath Sledge (<http://heathsledge.com>) for quick and able copyediting while we worked to meet our final deadlines. Over the course of our presentations of this work, we are grateful to have had hundreds of additional helpful conversations that improved this work immensely. We certainly have forgotten to list someone important by name, not because we are ungrateful, but because we are overwhelmed with gratitude for the wealth of expertise on which we have been fortunate enough to draw.

Darick Ritter ([www.sequentialpotential.com](http://www.sequentialpotential.com)), who is an incredibly talented artist, took our formal model—based on mathematical equations and social scientific jargon—and turned it into a work of art that conveys the main contributions of this book to wide audiences. We are thrilled that Oxford agreed to publish his work, Figure 4.1, in color, as it succinctly summarizes (and brings to life!) the dynamics of what sometimes feels like a very complicated story. Because our theory is based on counterfactual analysis, it is similarly challenging to locate illustrative examples of its dynamics; to that end, we are also grateful to Peter Carey, Ishita Chaudhry, Chris Medina, and graduate students at Universität Hamburg for helping us to find examples to color our prose.

## 1.2 Dedication

We dedicate this book to the memory of Will Moore, whose work serves as the intellectual foundation on which we base our arguments and who was an advisor, a mentor, and a friend. Over the course of his career, Will’s research tended toward two main topics: the dissent-repression “nexus” and the effect of institutions on government respect (or lack of respect) for human rights. The framework for the theory and empirical tests that we present in this book—our contention that scholars should take the conflict seriously when they investigate the effect of institutions on human rights outcomes—was born of Will’s influence.

Perhaps as a result of this influence, he liked the book. At least, we think he liked it; he invested in it by dismantling multiple versions of it multiple times. He celebrated when we finished the first draft, and he celebrated when it was sent out for review. Will died one year ago today, the day on which we pen this dedication. He did not live to celebrate with us when the book was accepted for publication, as he had when so many of our other publications were put in print. We hope the final version of the project would make him proud.

In addition to being influenced by Will’s scholarship, we were also incalculably fortunate to be the recipients of his time, his energy, and his mentorship. Will was insatiably curious and intellectually tireless. He invested heavily in both of our careers, spending hours upon hours guiding us and pushing us to improve our work. He modeled the practice of doing things not because it’s how other scholars do it but because it’s fascinating, bold, weird, inviting, and maybe wrong. He taught us to build institutions where none exist to solve a problem, to write non-positivist articles if you have an idea to share, and to ask questions in new and different ways. Because he was a builder of community, Will also encouraged us to be fiercely supportive of one another and of other scholars in our community. In dedication to Will, we promise to pay it forward.

### 1.3 Personal acknowledgments: Courtenay

I have been fortunate to have many generous mentors, colleagues, and friends to direct me in this profession and to redirect me when I wandered off course. But Will Moore stands alone as the most important driving influence in my becoming—and continuing to work as—a political scientist. Will was my dissertation advisor and my coauthor. He was an irreplaceable source of support and advice until his death; I rarely make a professional decision today without first asking myself what Will would do, what Will would say. (Asking those questions sometimes results in my doing the opposite of what he would have suggested, but I know he would understand.) Will is not simply responsible for influencing my work; I am a political scientist because of Will Moore. I miss him immensely. And I hope to one day be even half the scholar that he taught me to be.

My most important personal thank-you is tinged with professional gratitude. My husband, Nate, makes my life immeasurably better every day—by filling my days with joy and laughter, by working hard to build a Home with me, and by making me aspire to be a better scholar. I'm grateful to have his fingerprints on my life and on my work. Thank you to Abby and Will for embracing me as family and reminding me (daily!) about the importance of work-life balance. I love you both very much and cannot wait to see you with your new sister, Charlie—who, thankfully, seems to have delayed her arrival just long enough for us to complete this book. I am endlessly grateful to my parents, Bill and Charlotte, who instilled in me a great love of learning, always maintained high expectations for me in spite of my failures, and reassured me tirelessly along the way. Thank you to the rest of my family—Matt, Elaina, Mary, Keith, Amy, Dean, Dylan, Sadie, and Papa—for providing necessary diversions from my work and always seeming interested in this project, even when it felt like we might never finish it. Finally, an enormous debt of gratitude goes to Emily, who sets the bar incredibly high for coauthors. It has been eight years since we first started talking about this project; I cannot imagine anyone with whom I'd rather have celebrated its successes or cried about its setbacks.

## 1.4 Personal acknowledgments: Emily

I had been advised over and over again not to write a book before tenure because of the uncertainty of its timeline. I did so because the ideas in our heads were too big for articles. It needed to be a book. So often I wished I had taken my colleagues' advice, and so often I was glad I hadn't. Though I did not heed their warnings on this particular point, I constantly lean on mentors, colleagues, and friends for advice, reassurance, examples, and encouragement.

I have boundless gratitude for my political science colleagues at the University of California, Merced. I am moving to a new university this year after five years at Merced, and the loss of these colleagues leaves a crater in me. At Merced, I learned how to think deeply and across contexts. I learned the value of both likeness and diversity of thought. I learned how to build new institutions from scratch and disagree respectfully. I learned how to mentor others from those who mentored me. And I learned how to honor and practice work-life balance and equity of experience. I am indebted to my UCM colleagues, fine people and researchers all: Aditya Dasgupta, Daniel de Kadt, David Fortunato, Matt Hibbing, Haifeng Huang, Brad Le Veck, Melissa Sands, and Alex Theodoridis. I am especially grateful to the founders of this magnificent department, who so often bear more service, responsibility, and kindness than they should have to so that the junior faculty can succeed, all while advancing toward a steady vision and publishing their own brilliant work. Thank you, Tom Hansford, Nate Monroe, Steve Nicholson, and (my senior mentor!) Jessica Trounstine. Your example will follow me as I develop my own role as a senior scholar.

I must of course thank the many steadfast and supportive mentors on whom I rely in making so many career decisions. Warren Rosenblum was a key supporter and critic while I was a fledgling undergraduate scholar and remains one of my loudest cheerleaders now. David Davis, Jeff Staton, Jen Gandhi, Tom Clark, Dani Reiter, and especially Cliff Carrubba continually act as academic family to me, stepping aside to watch me grow while continuing to answer my calls, long after I've left the Emory nest. Christian Davenport and Will Moore identified me as a person with potential long before I would have known it, and

they invited me into their fold. They shaped who I am as a thinker, colleague, mentor, and participator in academia. I hope to someday be the kind of mentor to someone else that they have been to me. Thank you especially to Scott Wolford, whose discerning eye is on everything I write. I would not be the scholar I am if not for you.

Finally, I must thank my family—those related by blood, marriage, or friendship. My mom, Jeanette, taught me fairness and respect for all people, and she passed to me the excitement of discovery and understanding. My dad, Tom, taught me how things work and the mechanisms of cause and effect in the garage. Thank you, both, for making me a scientist. Thank you to the many people who love and root for me in my family—my sister, my in-laws, my aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents—we are a large brood of loud love. Thank you to my beautiful friends: Lindsey Barrow, Jessica Braithwaite, Cassy Dorff, Kara Gibson, Carissa Hansford, Daniel Hoffman, Ryan Louis, Doug Mackay, Alex Main, Amie Medley, Stephanie Raczkowski, Toby Rider, Sara Schumacher, Susan Navarro Smelcer, Jakana Thomas, James Wilson, and Scott Wolford. I often need pulling up by my armpits and a trip to the outdoors to find myself again, and you are the people who find me when I am too lost to do it on my own. And to Courtenay, with whom I am so in sync that we might be of one (very detail-oriented) mind: I cannot wait for a hundred more retreats of creating, writing, laughing, and crying with you.

My greatest loves are Darick and Henry Ritter. Thank you for giving me wings, pushing me to fly, and reminding me to come back home. You are my everything.

## Chapter 2

# Do human rights treaties protect rights?

Everyone wants to be safe from government violence. Unfortunately, billions of people experience human rights abuses as a way of life. More people die at the hands of their own government than in war. Minority groups are excluded from power, people are denied access to education, dissidents are beaten, prisoners are tortured. According to annual reports on human rights practices published by Amnesty International (AI) and the United States Department of State, every government violates the rights of some of its citizens in every year. During the last two decades of the twentieth century, over seventy percent of governments have engaged in torture in each year.<sup>1</sup> In 2012 alone, over a hundred countries were accused of limiting their citizens' rights to freedom of expression, and the security forces of fifty countries were reported to have unlawfully killed citizens.<sup>2</sup> The most frequent victims of repression are members of vulnerable groups: women and children, the elderly, indigenous cultures, and impoverished populations.<sup>3</sup> In 2011, for example, AI reported that indigenous peoples in the Americas struggled for government recognition of their land rights, and in Europe and Central Asia, migrants, the Roma, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+) individuals continued to face widespread discrimination.<sup>4</sup> Violations of human

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<sup>1</sup>Cingranelli, Richards, and Clay 2014; Conrad, Haglund, and Moore 2013.

<sup>2</sup>Amnesty International 2013.

<sup>3</sup>e.g., Conrad, Haglund, and Moore 2013; Rejali 2007.

<sup>4</sup>Amnesty International 2012.

rights can have widespread, dire consequences: Restrictions of individual liberties are associated with poverty and inequality, societal conflict, and non-democratic governance.

In the face of such abuses, individuals all over the world demand the right to speak their minds and challenge their governments without fear of discrimination or violent reprisal. Groups of people who oppose existing policies or resource allocations can work together to pressure the government for change, peacefully or violently; authorities can end or deter the popular threat by repressing, accommodating, or adapting in one of many other ways. Even in democracies, majorities and other powerful groups often support repression because they derive power from maintaining the status quo.<sup>5</sup> As in international conflict, domestic discrimination and violence are extensions of bargaining over disputed policies and resources. Many people see repression as a natural part of politics.

Victims, human rights advocates, and policymakers continually search for ways to end government abuses and their heinous individual and social consequences. The remedy most often suggested is law. Governments and international organizations alike turn to laws and courts to identify, stop, and prevent violations of human rights. Laws define individual rights, laying out the government's obligations with regard to people's security; courts adjudicate violations when they occur so they can be rectified.<sup>6</sup> Unlike many other democratic institutions, the rule of law is intended to protect minorities from the will (and abuse) of the majority, and law and courts are thus ideal for protecting vulnerable populations from violations of human rights.<sup>7</sup>

This is the driving idea behind international human rights treaties (HRTs), designed in the wake of World War II to protect citizen rights from government intrusion.<sup>8</sup> In ratifying an international human rights treaty, national governments publicly commit themselves to protect the rights of all persons under their domestic rule. These laws explicitly define the

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<sup>5</sup>Conrad, Hill, and Moore 2017.

<sup>6</sup>e.g., Cross 1999; Hathaway 2005; Keith 2002b; Moustafa 2007; Powell and Staton 2009.

<sup>7</sup>Conrad, Hill, and Moore 2017.

<sup>8</sup>A number of prominent scholars have written detailed, informative accounts of the historical development of the international human rights regime, including Simmons 2009, Chapter 2 and Hafner-Burton 2013, Chapter 4.

rights to which people are entitled, as well as the legal duties of the ratifying countries to protect people from the infringement of those rights. Some treaties are broad, governing a wide swath of human rights and relevant populations (like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights). Others are more specific, defining the rights and obligations with regard to one violation (like torture, as in the United Nations Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment) or offering specific protections to one group (like children, as in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child).

Government leaders face domestic and international pressure to obligate themselves to international human rights law. Domestic actors, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), unions, and political opposition parties, encourage heads of state to sign human rights treaties.<sup>9</sup> International leaders and institutions also pressure governments, using a variety of punishments and rewards to encourage them to commit to international standards based on an assumption that treaties will positively influence governmental rights protections.<sup>10</sup> Victims and advocates often act as if treaties have the legal and political strength to bind authorities who would violate rights. They refer to international obligations to protect in domestic court cases, in protests, in news reports, and in social movement campaigns.

But does international human rights law actually reduce government repression? Although human rights treaties clearly define obligations and are legally binding, they rarely include mechanisms for domestic or international enforcement. Signatory governments must restrain themselves and their agents, either by creating domestic institutions that punish rights violations or by choosing on their own not to repress.

Without inherent enforcement, scholars, policymakers, and even dissidents expect human rights treaties to “work” only when signatories would not violate rights anyway; in other words, treaties constrain repression only in the absence of a domestic threat to power. Government authorities will allow themselves to be constrained by treaties only when they

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<sup>9</sup>Hafner-Burton 2009.

<sup>10</sup>Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999.

can use tactics other than repression to effectively control challenges. Institutions that allow for peaceful leader replacement, for instance, are more likely to protect rights when opposition groups push for electoral turnover.<sup>11</sup>

If, instead, they predominantly repress when challenged, governments ignore their international obligations. Autocratic regimes are frequently signatories to international human rights treaties while violating the treaties' terms with impunity. For example, countries including the Democratic Republic of Congo, China, Egypt, Syria, and many others have ratified the United Nations Convention Against Torture (CAT) while continuing to engage in the torture and ill-treatment of their citizens at alarming rates. Syria acceded to the Chemical Weapons Convention in 2013, during its ongoing civil conflict, but in April 2017 unleashed chemical agents, killing dozens and maiming hundreds of civilians.<sup>12</sup> Democratic leaders do this, too, publicly denigrating international laws with the intention to violate their terms. Prime Minister Theresa May responded to terror attacks in 2017 by proposing to change Britain's human rights laws to allow authorities to deport suspected terrorists without sufficient evidence to convict. She has similarly argued the UK should leave the European Convention for Human Rights (ECHR), saying, "The ECHR can bind the hands of parliament, adds nothing to our prosperity, makes us less secure by preventing the deportation of dangerous foreign nationals—and does nothing to change the attitudes of governments like Russia's when it comes to human rights."<sup>13</sup>

With frequent abuses in all regime types and public disdain for international rights treaties among state leaders, scholars and policymakers tend to be pessimistic about the ability of human rights law to limit government repression. Many argue that international human rights treaties are mere window dressing, letting states put on a benevolent image while violating rights whenever they can justify it in the interest of power.<sup>14</sup>

In this book, we argue that government decisions about whether to comply with inter-

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<sup>11</sup>Hafner-Burton, Hyde, and Jablonski 2014.

<sup>12</sup>Loveluck and DeYoung 2017.

<sup>13</sup>May, quoted in Asthana and Mason 2016.

<sup>14</sup>Downs, Rocke, and Barsboom 1996; Goodliffe, Hawkins, et al. 2012; Hathaway 2002; von Stein 2016.

national human rights obligations are directly tied to conflicts with civilians over policies; in other words, compliance with international human rights law is a function of contention. To know whether and when human rights treaties will effectively constrain governments from repression, we must understand the context of dissent faced by those governments. Most scholars studying human rights treaties focus on the extent to which authorities have the opportunity to repress. They assume that governments will violate rights whenever possible, and that international and domestic institutions limit the governments' possibilities or opportunities to do so. This approach assumes that countries with strong institutions of constraint, like domestic courts, contested elections, or democratic legislatures, are more responsive to human rights treaty constraints than those with weak institutions.<sup>15</sup> Yet, as with any potential law violation, opportunity to misbehave without the motive to do so yields no crime. Popular challenges and the threat they represent to a government's hold on policies and power constitute the state's primary motive to repress. To determine whether international human rights treaties can meaningfully influence a government's human rights behaviors, we must first consider the incentives that motivate leaders to repress.

## 2.1 Treaties and the incentive to violate human rights

Posner (2014, Ch. 1) opens his controversial book with a vignette about Amarildo de Souza, a Brazilian bricklayer who in July 2013 was tortured and disappeared by members of the *Unidade de Policia Pacificadora* (UPP) as part of its operation to crack down on drug trafficking. Following his disappearance, protestors took to the streets in Mr. de Souza's hometown of Rocinha and throughout Brazil, calling for an investigation into the disappearance. In several instances, demonstrations were met with additional police violence. Over twenty Brazilian police officers were eventually charged with (and ten were convicted of) torturing and murdering Mr. de Souza. Based on the de Souza case and his own account of the prevalence of disappearances in Brazil, Posner suggests that international human rights

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<sup>15</sup>e.g., Cingranelli and Filippov 2010; Keith 2012; Lupu 2013a, 2015; Simmons 2009; von Stein 2016.

treaties—institutions intended to constrain these very types of government behaviors—have failed. According to Posner, Mr. de Souza would not have been tortured and killed if human rights treaties were able to successfully constrain national authorities.

Certainly, Mr. de Souza’s disappearance highlights the fact that the Brazilian government engaged in human rights abuses even after the country became party to several international human rights treaties. But perhaps Brazilian abuses would have been worse absent their international commitment. What would Brazilian human rights practices have been if the country were not a member of the international rights treaties to which it is a party? Would disappearances have been even more prevalent? Obviously, it is impossible to know for sure; this exercise is hypothetical. But rather than assume that one highly visible abuse of human rights means that human rights treaties have failed, we use careful deduction based on the observable characteristics of countries to predict what those countries would have done under a different treaty obligation status.

International commitments did not prevent the crime against Mr. de Souza, but they may have prevented other crimes from occurring. Police might have used violent tactics more openly, or against more civilians, in the absence of international obligations. Brazilian authorities may repress less overall than they would have without the constraints offered by international treaty commitments. Human rights treaties also might be responsible—either directly or indirectly, via their effect on the public’s willingness to protest—for ensuring justice in Brazilian court for Mr. de Souza and his family. Following the protests, NGO Human Rights Watch repeatedly pressured Brazil to uphold its international obligations, stating, “The Brazilian government’s obligation under this body of law and norms [international human rights law] is not only to prevent torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment but also to thoroughly investigate and prosecute such acts when they occur—including by making certain that detainees are brought before judicial authorities without unnecessary delay.”<sup>16</sup> Although treaty law may not prevent all violations of human rights, we argue that

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<sup>16</sup>Human Rights Watch 2014.

treaties affect domestic conflict and policy outcomes. A nation's commitment to the terms of international human rights—and the expectation that authorities can be held legally responsible for rights violations—can embolden popular protest, and protest itself influences government repression.

This simple example illustrates the importance of identifying the counterfactual. What would happen in a treaty-obligated country if it faced the very same institutions and conflict but was not obligated to an international human rights treaty? What would happen in an unobligated country if it faced the same institutions and conflict but was obligated under international law?

To answer these questions, we cannot look simply at human rights practices before and after a government ratifies an international human rights treaty. A decrease in violations after treaty ratification does not necessarily mean the treaty is responsible for the change, and an increase in violations post-ratification does not necessarily mean the treaty is failing to limit government repression. Reductions in government abuses of human rights may be the result of other institutions that constrain authorities from repression<sup>17</sup> or of behavioral changes in political interactions that reduce incentives to repress,<sup>18</sup> such that the treaty is not meaningfully constraining state behavior.<sup>19</sup> And while governments may violate rights more after ratifying an international treaty than they did when unobligated, if that heightened level of repression is less than they would have chosen under the same conditions absent the treaty commitment, international law has successfully increased protection for human rights.

In this book, we carefully investigate two counterfactuals. First, for countries that have ratified an international human rights treaty, does that obligation improve government respect for human rights relative to the projected level of repression that would have existed absent the treaty? Second, for countries that have not committed to an international human

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<sup>17</sup>von Stein 2016.

<sup>18</sup>Ritter 2014.

<sup>19</sup>e.g., Downs, Rocke, and Barsoom 1996; Simmons and Hopkins 2005; von Stein 2005.

rights treaty, would treaty ratification improve government respect for human rights relative to extant rights practices absent the treaty?

Of course, it is impossible to directly observe what would have happened in an alternative treaty status for each country. We use carefully defined concepts and mathematical theory to help us identify the most logical possible outcome for each unobserved state. We assume that all governments face a set of incentives—dissidents considering a meaningful challenge to the status quo and institutions threatening consequences—that influence their decisions to commit to international human rights law or to violate people’s human rights. Domestic and international constraining institutions, and the government’s strategic interaction with dissidents, determine the extent to which a government will repress. We use the observable characteristics of a country at a given moment in time to predict levels of repression and dissent for two alternative scenarios, one in which the country is committed to international human rights law and one in which the country is not committed to international human rights law. The difference in conflict activities across the two scenarios represents the treaty’s effect on human rights practices.

## 2.2 Contentious compliance: The argument

The main point of this book—its most important contribution—is to point out that international human rights treaties work. They improve human rights outcomes. Not all the time, and not with perfect certainty. But under certain conditions—namely, when the stakes of retaining power are high for political leaders and domestic courts are relatively poor at constraining the executive—international human rights law alters the structure of the strategic conflict between political authorities and potential dissidents, significantly decreasing government repression and increasing mobilized dissent activities.

To draw conclusions about whether and how international treaty obligations affect human rights practices, we need to establish when and why a government would want to abuse

human rights in the first place. To do that, we model the political conflict between dissidents and government authorities and its effects on government outcomes; this lays out the government’s baseline motive to engage in repression. In addition, we incorporate into our theory the domestic institutions that would constrain those leaders from repressing. This defines the opportunity to repress, enabling us to see the extent to which government repression is domestically permitted or prevented, regardless of the government’s treaty status. Finally, governments can choose whether to ratify an international HRT, which will create consequences—some marginal, some significant—for violating its terms. In whole, the theory allows us to predict what government repression would look like in a country with a particular set of characteristics and then draw predictions about how repression would differ under an obligation to an international human rights treaty.

Repression is defined as any threatened limit or coercive action levied by government authorities to control or prevent domestic political challenges that would alter the status quo policy or distribution of power.<sup>20</sup> Repression is motivated as a response to or in prevention of dissent.<sup>21</sup> It can be legal or illegal, violent or nonviolent, and it includes tactics ranging from government limits on freedom of speech and assembly, discriminatory policies, and unlawful surveillance to political arrests, mass torture, and killing. It includes both what scholars and practitioners call civil liberties violations and physical integrity violations. Any behavior used to prevent people from participating in their own governance can be considered repression, and repression in its various forms are almost always violations of human rights as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and a multitude of international treaties.

Our definition of government repression constitutes a narrower conceptualization than the broader legal category of human rights violations. Many scholars of human rights focus on the rights first defined as such in the UDHR. In addition to the violations that we consider repression, the larger category of human rights includes, for example, a right to education,

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<sup>20</sup>cf. Davenport 2007a; Goldstein 1978; Poe and Tate 1994; Ritter 2014.

<sup>21</sup>Ritter and Conrad 2016b.

to health care, and to one's own culture (Hafner-Burton 2013, Chapter 2). Governments may violate these rights for purposes of exclusion or control, as when women are not allowed an education or a group is denied the use of its native language; we consider those behaviors to be repression. However, these rights may also be violated due to a lack of infrastructural capacity within a given state; we do not consider such violations to be repression, although they are indeed rights violations. We focus our attention on rights violated with the intent to control or prevent domestic challenges to the political status quo, so as to correctly capture the political process of contention rather than capturing violations that occur because of a lack of capacity to protect. We refer to these government violations interchangeably throughout the book as (human) rights violations and government repression.

Governments do not violate human rights randomly or without reason; they repress during conflicts over domestic policy. Authorities want to control the status quo through policy or practice or regime, and (some) people within the state's territorial jurisdiction likely prefer a different policy or practice or regime. Governments violate human rights to retain control when they are threatened by an implicit or explicit domestic challenge. Repression can reduce political challengers' ability to threaten the incumbent government<sup>22</sup> or help the government determine the extent to which dissenters will go to upset the status quo.<sup>23</sup> To be sure, authorities also violate rights for many non-tactical reasons, including bias, culture, resource limitations, or the interest of domestic security.<sup>24</sup> These motives are less mutable than the desire for control or power, and they produce outcomes via a different process than repression, which is explicitly connected to threat. We focus here on repression.

We define mobilized dissent as a coordinated attempt by a group of non-government actors to influence political outcomes outside of means organized by the state.<sup>25</sup> Government authorities are more likely to repress dissent as it becomes more violent, more multidimen-

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<sup>22</sup>Nordås and Davenport 2013; Sullivan 2016b.

<sup>23</sup>Galtung 1969; Ritter and Conrad 2016b.

<sup>24</sup>Hafner-Burton 2013.

<sup>25</sup>We use the terms dissent and challenge interchangeably. For similar definitions, see, e.g., Tilly 1978, Tarrow 1991, and McAdam 1999.

sional, more organized, or more threatening in its goals.<sup>26</sup> If there is no (threat of) dissent, leaders have little reason to repress. Some countries face little dissent and consequently have little reason to violate human rights; a country's positive human rights record is not always due to rights protections from international human rights treaties or any other institutions.

Repression and dissent are connected, in that they occur as part of a strategic interaction between the government and potential dissidents. The government engages (or not) in repression in expectation of dissent, and dissidents mobilize and take action (or not) in expectation of repression.<sup>27</sup> In Part I, we present a formal theory that starts from a simple model of strategic conflict: Government authorities and dissidents choose how much to repress and dissent, respectively, in the attempt to win control over some policy outcome. Because repression and dissent choices are so intertwined, we specify a theory of simultaneous action, meaning that a leader and a group of dissidents each choose their conflict behaviors in the knowledge that the other actor is making decisions at the same time. Anything affecting the government's choice to repress—for example, a commitment to an international human rights treaty—affects not only the government's decision about repression but the entirety of the conflict. When a treaty constrains the government's ability or willingness to repress, it also influences the dissidents' choices regarding dissent, which in turn alters the government's decision about whether to respond with some form of repression. From this theory, we draw conclusions about the effects of international human rights treaties on both government repression and mobilized dissent—interdependent outcomes of a single conflict process.

Government authorities faced with dissent do not always repress—they are more likely to violate human rights when dissent occurs in a context that is particularly threatening to their ability to set policies or hold power.<sup>28</sup> When losing the conflict to a dissident group damages the leader's authority, the leader represses to avoid that outcome. The leader is

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<sup>26</sup>e.g., Davenport 1995, 1996, 2000; Davis and Ward 1990; Francisco 1996; Gartner and Regan 1996; Moore 1998; Poe, Tate, Keith, and Lanier 2000.

<sup>27</sup>cf. Ritter 2014.

<sup>28</sup>Davenport 2000; Lorentzen 2013; Poe, Tate, Keith, and Lanier 2000.

also more likely to repress as the stakes of holding office increase. When holding office is particularly valuable or the consequences for losing office are terrible, dissidents are more likely to challenge the government. Thus, as the stakes of holding office increase, leaders are more likely to repress to prevent possible loss to dissidents.<sup>29</sup>

Some leaders who are motivated to repress are nevertheless constrained from doing so by domestic political institutions that make repression more costly. The domestic institution most consistently found to constrain government repression is the court.<sup>30</sup> A leader motivated to repress dissidents has to consider the probability of incurring court-related costs for violating human rights. Individuals can bring civil and criminal cases against authorities for violating rights, and their beliefs about success in the legal process inform their propensity to litigate. Even if the courts were to ultimately rule in favor of the government, the process of litigation involves costs that leaders prefer to avoid. The potential for costly legal consequences leads authorities to repress less and remain under the court’s radar,<sup>31</sup> and that restraint opens opportunities for dissent.<sup>32</sup>

When a government ratifies an international human rights treaty, the treaty is incorporated into an existing baseline of constraint, much of which comes from the domestic court. We argue that an international human rights treaty obligation adds to the baseline propensity for litigation of human rights violation, adding to existing laws,<sup>33</sup> increasing the visibility and legitimacy of rights claims,<sup>34</sup> and encouraging NGO activity supporting victims of human rights violations in bringing legal action.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>We refer formally to this concept as a leader’s expected value for power. We use the term “expected value” because it encompasses both how much the leader benefits from retaining power and how much they expect to remain in that position. Formally, this is a von Neumann-Morgenstern expected utility function, which multiplies the probability that the leader will remain in power at the end of the interaction (which we denote as  $\theta$ , where  $0 \leq \theta \leq 1$ ) by the value of staying in power ( $v_{in}$ ) or the value of losing it (which we normalize to 0). The leader’s expected value of retaining power is specified as  $\mathbb{E}[U_L] = \theta * v_{in} + (1 - \theta) * 0$ .

<sup>30</sup>e.g., Cross 1999; Hathaway 2005; Hill and Z. Jones 2014; Keith 2002b; S. M. Mitchell, Ring, and Spellman 2013; Powell and Staton 2009; Simmons 2009. For an argument that it is not the court but the court’s litigants that constrain the government, see Rosenberg 1991.

<sup>31</sup>Powell and Staton 2009.

<sup>32</sup>Ritter and Conrad 2016a.

<sup>33</sup>Hill 2015.

<sup>34</sup>Simmons 2009.

<sup>35</sup>Hafner-Burton, LeVeck, and Victor 2016.

Existing domestic constraints therefore condition how meaningful international treaties can be for changing human rights outcomes. When a government already has laws that protect rights, police that enforce those protections, and courts that identify violations, the probability of human rights protection changes very little when a treaty is added to these existing mechanisms. In his 1970 testimony to the United States Senate during debate about ratification of the Genocide Convention, Richard Gardner, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs and a law professor at Columbia University, testified that “[r]atification of the convention would create no new criminal liability for American citizens, since genocide already is a crime under federal and state law.”<sup>36</sup> Countries with few laws in place or courts that have difficulty ruling against the state can draw strength from international treaty obligations. These are the contexts where an international treaty can most change the domestic legal environment. In short, international human rights treaty obligations create new and meaningful constraints when domestic courts are relatively ineffective, but they do little to change conflict relations between governments and potential dissidents in countries with effective courts.

The crux of our argument is that international human rights treaties lead to different levels of government repression than we would otherwise expect when (a) mobilized dissent is threatening enough to motivate repression (when leaders place a high value on remaining in power) and (b) domestic courts are insufficient to constrain that abuse. These conditions lead to an overall increase in conflict: dissidents engage in dissent more to try to change the status quo, and leaders repress more to control that dissent. When a leader facing these conditions is obligated under an international human rights treaty, we find empirical evidence that the government will repress less—and dissidents will dissent more—than would have happened in the same country had there been no international treaty obligation.

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<sup>36</sup>This is a quotation from an article summarizing his statements. See “Genocide Convention” 1971.

## 2.3 Contributions to science and practice

Our new theory and intriguing findings result from a unique approach to the research question of whether international human rights treaties improve human rights outcomes. Our approach combines theoretical and empirical innovations to address the difficulties of studying how domestic and international institutions affect human rights protections.

Social scientists disagree about whether human rights treaties effectively reduce government repression. A wealth of empirical evidence suggests that international human rights treaties do not unequivocally improve government respect for human rights,<sup>37</sup> and a few studies suggest that treaty commitments could even make human rights violations worse in ratifying states, especially dictatorships.<sup>38</sup> Treaties may function less as constraints on repressive governments than as signals of existing values or good intentions. Governments may join treaties for their expressive benefit, signaling to the international community either that they do value human rights or that they intend to make changes in the future.<sup>39</sup> This behavior may be particularly common when states want to be perceived as similar to other states that value human rights protections.<sup>40</sup> Many of the countries that join human rights treaties already have good practices when they ratify, and the treaty therefore does not meaningfully change their behavior;<sup>41</sup> Simmons (2009) labels these states sincere ratifiers. Each of these explanations suggests that many countries commit to international law with no expectation or intention of changing their human rights practices, and thus that human rights treaties are ineffective.

Yet other social scientists, international legal scholars, and advocates for the protection of human rights contend that treaties act as real limits on repressive government behavior by making it more costly for the government to repress domestic populations. Costs can

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<sup>37</sup>e.g., Hafner-Burton 2005; Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2007; Hathaway 2002; Hill 2010; Keith 1999; Lupu 2013b; Neumayer 2005.

<sup>38</sup>e.g., Hathaway 2002; Hollyer and Rosendorff 2011; Vreeland 2008a.

<sup>39</sup>Hathaway 2002.

<sup>40</sup>Goodliffe, Hawkins, et al. 2012.

<sup>41</sup>Downs, Rocke, and Barsoom 1996; von Stein 2016.

accrue in a number of ways when governments violate the terms of an international human rights treaty. The cost may be normative or social; states may fear a negative reputation or public shaming if they violate the terms of a treaty.<sup>42</sup> The costs may also be economic, for international partners may restrict trade or aid to repressive governments conditional on human rights practices.<sup>43</sup> Yet there is scarce evidence that other countries provide material benefits for ratification<sup>44</sup> or punish noncompliance with treaty terms.<sup>45</sup> Instead, scholars have largely turned to investigating the extent to which domestic institutions enforce otherwise unenforceable international obligations.

Scholars tend to agree that democracies—or at least countries with democratic institutions—are more likely to actually follow the terms of their treaty obligations.<sup>46</sup> Countries that are obligated to human rights treaties frequently exhibit stronger rights protections when they have effective domestic institutions to enforce limits on executive behavior.<sup>47</sup> Legislatures, emboldened by international commitments, may set policies that protect rights or make it difficult for leaders to violate them.<sup>48</sup> Treaty obligations can alter the tone of political discourse to focus more heavily on the rights protected by law; under international treaty obligation, policymakers are more likely to shift the legislative agenda, and interested social groups are more likely to push governments for more protections.<sup>49</sup> Monitoring and bureaucratic efficacy allow governments to better recognize violations and facilitate implementation and enforcement of the treaty's terms.<sup>50</sup> And domestic courts can adjudicate violations, potentially constraining leaders who would violate the terms of an international treaty.<sup>51</sup> These

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<sup>42</sup>Davis, Murdie, and Steinmetz 2012; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Hendrix and Wong 2013; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Murdie and Peksen 2014; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999.

<sup>43</sup>S. L. Blanton and R. G. Blanton 2007; Hafner-Burton 2005; Lebovic and Voeten 2006.

<sup>44</sup>Nielsen and Simmons 2015.

<sup>45</sup>Ramcharan 1989.

<sup>46</sup>See also Hathaway 2002, Davenport and Armstrong 2004, Neumayer 2005, and von Stein 2016.

<sup>47</sup>Hathaway 2005; Powell and Staton 2009; von Stein 2016.

<sup>48</sup>Lupu 2015.

<sup>49</sup>e.g., Simmons 2009. Some international human rights treaties may have more influence over domestic politics than others. States that ratify the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), in particular, consistently have been shown to improve women's living conditions (Hill 2010; Lupu 2013b).

<sup>50</sup>Cole 2012, 2015.

<sup>51</sup>Hill 2012; Lupu 2013a; Powell and Staton 2009; Sikkink and Walling 2007; Simmons 2009; Sloss 2009.

institutions create costs for violating rights that leaders would prefer to avoid.

Social science’s contradictory, inconsistent findings on the effects of international human rights law are due, in part, to a misspecified model. Typically, studies assume that government authorities and institutions are the only relevant actors in what we argue is a conflict between the government and potential dissidents. The most common scholarly narrative goes like this: If a domestic or international institution creates negative consequences for authorities that violate rights, authorities will repress less frequently (or at lower levels) to avoid those consequences.<sup>52</sup> In other words, the incentives informing leaders’ choices are assumed to be exogenous to their decisions. Repression is the government’s choice alone. This model makes it straightforward to predict how a treaty’s consequences will influence human rights violations: When incentives shift, the decision should respond in kind.

However, these decision-theoretic frameworks ignore the possibility that repression affects the leader’s incentives to repress—that it affects dissent. If, for instance, repression were influenced only by covariates like culture, demographics, ethnic fractionalization, and colonial history,<sup>53</sup> then government authorities could easily assess the effective level of necessary repression. If, as these theories assume, domestic threats to the regime are given or exogenous, then domestic threats can simply be included as a variable in a regression model to produce a straightforward prediction of how threat affects repression.<sup>54</sup>

However, if, as we assert, a government makes decisions about repression as part of a strategic interaction with another actor—dissidents—who can anticipate the government’s choice and change course, then an institution’s effect on repression is not so straightforward.

In failing to consider the effect of institutions on incentives for dissent, the decision-theoretic approach described above ignores the insights of an entire branch of social science scholarship arguing that the government’s decision to repress is part of a dynamic conflict—a strategic interaction between groups that threaten mobilized action to change the status

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<sup>52</sup>e.g., Conrad 2014; Hafner-Burton 2005; Hathaway 2002, 2007; Hill 2010; Keith 1999; Lupu 2013a,b; Neumayer 2005; Simmons 2009; von Stein 2016.

<sup>53</sup>Hafner-Burton 2013; Hill and Z. Jones 2014; Poe and Tate 1994.

<sup>54</sup>Conrad and Moore 2010; Davenport 2007b; Poe, Tate, and Keith 1999.

quo and a government that threatens to repress dissidents to maintain it. In this strategic model, repression is used to deter or eliminate dissent.<sup>55</sup> The causal arrow can also go the other way: People may mobilize because they do not want to be repressed,<sup>56</sup> or they may stay home altogether in expectation of having their rights violated.<sup>57</sup> Thus, the government's decision to repress is a function of (expected) dissent, and dissidents decide whether to dissent in expectation of having their rights violated.<sup>58</sup> Human rights violations are not merely determined by the leader's assessment of the consequences of rights violations; repression is also determined in part by the leader's desire to control strategic, anticipatory, popular dissent.<sup>59</sup>

In assuming that international human rights treaties affect government repression (or not) without considering that they also affect dissent, analysts commit the sin of omitted variable bias. If dissent only influenced repression in one direction—say, to increase it—this would not be too problematic. Omitting dissent from empirical models would bias estimated treaty effects in one way consistently, and the direction of the prediction would be unaffected. However, dissent sometimes leads to more repression,<sup>60</sup> sometimes less,<sup>61</sup> and sometimes the direction of the relationship is not clear at all.<sup>62</sup> Thus, scholars cannot know the direction in which the omitted variable biases their findings, and readers of these studies cannot be sure that their conclusions are correct interpretations of the evidence.

We bring together these previously divergent literatures and take seriously the idea that leaders make decisions about whether and how much to repress not only in expectation of institutional punishment (e.g., treaty constraints) but also in anticipation of the dynamic,

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<sup>55</sup>e.g., Danneman and Ritter 2014; Davenport 2007a; DeMeritt and J. K. Young 2013; Moore 2000; Nordås and Davenport 2013.

<sup>56</sup>e.g., Cederman, Wimmer, and Min 2010; Gurr 1970; McAdam 1999.

<sup>57</sup>e.g., Galtung 1969; Regan and Henderson 2002; Ritter 2014.

<sup>58</sup>Ritter and Conrad 2016b.

<sup>59</sup>For examples of explicitly strategic models, see, e.g., Lichbach 1987, Pierskalla 2010, Hollyer and Rosendorff 2011, Ritter 2014, Shadmehr and Bernhardt 2011, and Shadmehr 2014.

<sup>60</sup>Davenport 1995, 1996, 2007a; Earl, Soule, and McCarthy 2003; Gartner and Regan 1996; J. C. King 1998; Poe, Tate, Keith, and Lanier 2000.

<sup>61</sup>S. C. Carey 2010; Davenport and Armstrong 2004; Moore 2000; Rasler 1996; Shellman 2006.

<sup>62</sup>Ritter 2014; Ritter and Conrad 2016b.

strategic decisions of potential dissidents. We argue that institutions like human rights treaties affect conflict between government authorities and potential dissidents. Institutions that present consequences for violations affect the expectations of both government authorities and their opposition, and therefore also affect the conflict behaviors between the two groups. We integrate the assumptions that (1) international human rights treaties, through domestic institutions, increase the costs of repressing; (2) potential dissidents may respond to those institutions and the expectation of constrained repression with changes in dissent; and (3) authorities base decisions about repression on both the expectation of dissent and institutional constraint. Because they base their decisions about repression on both dissent and constraint, leaders are caught between a rock and a hard place: the pressures on the leader to repress less and respond to the domestic population are frequently at odds with one another.

The ideal way to draw conclusions about the causal effects of international human rights treaty commitment on government repression is to compare a country in a given year to the very same country in the same year, one version obligated to a treaty and the other not, while taking into account that the obligated country self-selected into its obligation status. This is the most direct and useful comparison: country compared to itself in an alternative treatment, rather than compared to a dream of perfect compliance, or to a different country altogether, or to the same country at a different point in time.

Game theory allows us to make this comparison; comparative statics analysis allows us to use clear statements of the counterfactual conditions to derive predictions. We set the observable characteristics of a country (the leader's value for their office and the probability of domestic legal consequences) at particular values and predict what levels of repression and dissent the leader and potential dissidents would choose if the country was not obligated to an international human rights treaty. Then we use the same values of the state's characteristics, changing only the state's treaty commitment status. By comparing these predicted values (across a continuum of possible state characteristics), we can identify whether and

how conflict outcomes differ with changes in treaty commitment status, with an explicit understanding of the reference point on which that claim rests. The theory also addresses the selection concern described above—the fact that treaty-obligated countries have usually voluntarily opted in to their treaty status. The theory has implications as to how the treaty’s likely effect should differ for states who opt into its jurisdiction as compared to those who opt out. From the formal model, we derive several nuanced and conditional implications as to when and how treaties affect repression and dissent, which allow us to do multiple critical tests of this and alternative explanations using observed statistical data. This process allows us to come as close as possible to comparing the behavior of a country to itself in an alternate treaty reality using observable evidence.

As a consequence of the incorporation of strategic dissent into our theory and the clear identification of the behavioral counterfactual, the argument presented in this book yields a rich set of implications not previously seen in—and even running counter to—prior international human rights treaty scholarship. We argue, supported by empirical evidence, that treaties meaningfully reduce government repression under surprising conditions: They meaningfully reduce repression when authorities are both motivated to repress most severely and are relatively unconstrained in doing so. Furthermore, we derive implications as to how international human rights treaties affect the likelihood of dissent actions supporting popular demands—novel findings that are undescribed in prior scholarship, which has focused on government repression rather than on the broader dynamic of strategic conflict between repression and dissent.

### 2.3.1 Human rights treaties and repression

We argue that human rights treaties constrain or prevent government repression through a logic of expectations. Of course, HRTs do much more than prevent repression: They set standards, express collective goals, create institutions, and much more. And, of course, full human rights protection requires much more than simply stopping politically motivated

abuses; it also requires developing and supporting individual freedoms and rights. But one of the central functions of HRTs is to stop repression, and we show in this book that they frequently do—more, even, than some scholars or analysts would suppose.

Much has been written about the “screening” effect of international human rights treaties. According to scholarship, countries with high values for human rights protection are the most likely to join treaties but the least likely to change their behavior.<sup>63</sup> After all, there is little to change; these countries are already on their best behavior. Most scholars identify these screening countries by institutional or state-level characteristics that make authorities more likely to protect rights, such as democratic or otherwise effective institutions.<sup>64</sup> We too argue that countries with strong constraining institutions should see little effect from international treaties on rights practices, and that these countries are more likely to join treaties. In particular, we find countries in which the population and authorities generally expect that repressive actors could be brought to court will not change their repression practices with treaty ratification. In these countries (which are highly likely to voluntarily join treaties), rights protection comes not because the court enforces international treaty laws, but because domestic actors already expect legal consequences for rights violations; in screening states, rights violations are already constrained by the domestic court. In other words, although international human rights treaties are correlated with rights protection in countries with effective courts, treaties do not improve rights protection in these countries.

In a surprising turn, we also find that countries that enjoy a lack of threat from potential dissidents behave like screening states. While it is not new to argue that regimes facing threat are more likely to repress,<sup>65</sup> the idea of threat has been difficult to conceptualize<sup>66</sup> and rarely applied to theories of human rights treaties.<sup>67</sup> Most scholars agree that dissent

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<sup>63</sup>Downs, Rocke, and Barsoom 1996; Goodliffe and Hawkins 2006; Hathaway 2002; Hill 2010; Lupu 2013b; von Stein 2016.

<sup>64</sup>Lupu 2015; Powell and Staton 2009; Simmons 2009; von Stein 2016.

<sup>65</sup>Conrad and Moore 2010; Davenport 2000, 2007b; Galtung 1969; Goldstein 1978; Poe, Tate, Keith, and Lanier 2000; Tilly 1978.

<sup>66</sup>inter alia Davenport 2007a.

<sup>67</sup>e.g., Goodliffe and Hawkins 2006; Hafner-Burton 2005; Keith 1999; Landman 2005; Neumayer 2005; Powell and Staton 2009.

represents a threat to a government's power or policies, but not every instance of dissent elicits a repressive response.<sup>68</sup> We show that leaders who have low stakes in a conflict over policy are generally less threatened by dissent; repression would cost them more than it would help them. International human rights treaties do not constrain these leaders, since they would not have repressed with or without the obligations. A lack of motive means no constraint is necessary. Thus, treaties are not redundant only in countries with strong domestic institutions; they are also unnecessary and have no effect when regimes do not face threats.

Importantly, however, we show that treaty obligations can have a meaningful and positive constraining effect in countries where government repression and mobilized dissent are most likely to occur. Leaders who have the most to lose from conflict are both likely to be challenged and prone to high levels of repression.<sup>69</sup> These are conditions where institutional constraint becomes possible, because in this situation, there is repression that can be constrained. Compared to what the same government would do absent an international human rights treaty commitment, obligated governments repress less. Empirical estimates with observed data across multiple types of human rights treaties and repression support this prediction.

Our results highlight previously unstudied variation in the effects of international and domestic constraints on human rights outcomes, shifting the focus from national predictors—the state level—to leaders as decision-makers—the individual leader level. For example, it is well known that democracies are more likely to comply with international treaties than non-democracies,<sup>70</sup> but within each of these regime types, the leaders vary year to year in their expectations of or benefits from holding power and consequences for losing it. Our theory suggests that leaders with the most on the line—the leaders often found in dictatorships—are more likely to respond to institutional constraints like treaties, while leaders with lower

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<sup>68</sup>e.g., Lorentzen 2014.

<sup>69</sup>Ritter 2014.

<sup>70</sup>Hathaway 2002; von Stein 2016.

stakes in retaining office—some in democracies, some in non-democracies—are less likely to base their decisions on treaty commitment status. The implications for predicting democratic and dictatorial responses to international treaty commitment are unexpected.

To be clear, although treaty obligations constrain leaders to repress less than they would absent such commitments, overall levels of repression often remain high. This result is key to understanding the many contradictions in scholarly and political analyses of treaty effects. Comparing repression straightforwardly across countries might lead one to conclude that treaties actually improve the rights practices in states with low-stakes leaders rather than high-stakes ones, since the former repress less overall.<sup>71</sup> However, when we estimate the appropriate counterfactual—what the same leader would do under a different treaty obligation status—we find that although high-stakes leaders repress more than low-stakes ones, it is the high-stakes leaders whose repressive behaviors change under treaty obligations, because those obligations change the conflict between them and domestic dissenting groups.

Our findings suggest that constraints like international human rights treaties work to improve rights practices in situations where previous research would have inferred institutional failure. International institutions are most effective at limiting rights violations when repression is expected to be at its highest levels—they serve as a last-ditch effort to protect rights when threat motivates conflict and domestic institutions fail to constrain a powerful government. Thus, in spite of scholarly skepticism,<sup>72</sup> human rights treaties may play an important role in limiting violations of human rights where and when the need for institutional constraints is the most critical.

### 2.3.2 Human rights treaties and dissent

Although numerous studies point to the social causes and societal consequences of mobilization and protest,<sup>73</sup> very few scholars examine the effect of international institutions on

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<sup>71</sup>See, e.g., Hafner-Burton 2013; Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2007.

<sup>72</sup>e.g., Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2007.

<sup>73</sup>e.g., Earl 2003; Earl, Soule, and McCarthy 2003; Gates 2002; Kuran 1991; McAdam 1999; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Olson 1965; Schussman and Soule 2005; Tarrow 1991; Tilly 1978.

the outcomes of these domestic conflicts. This book breaks new ground in the study of social mobilization and popular dissent by arguing that international human rights treaties influence both repression and dissident challenges at the same time.<sup>74</sup>

Individuals face a collective action problem when deciding whether to engage in mobilized dissent activities around an issue or practice. Grievances such as inequalities, deprivation, exclusion from power, or poor economic conditions create dissatisfaction, which serves as a pre-condition for dissent or rebellion.<sup>75</sup> When actors desire change to existing policy or practice, they consider joining together, committing to exert resources and effort and assuming the risk of negative government responses.<sup>76</sup> Changes in the status quo (such as policy change) often take the form of a non-excludable good (in other words, the change benefits everyone in a related group, not only the people who worked to bring it about). Individuals thus have incentives to free-ride and let others bear the costs of collective action.<sup>77</sup> The logical conclusion of the free-rider problem is underprovision<sup>78</sup>—no one joins the movement, and the desired change cannot occur. To solve this problem, institutions or actors must reduce the costs of mobilization, increase the benefits of mobilization, or provide information about each.<sup>79</sup>

International treaties can provide information that helps coordinate and motivate mobilization, offering an institutional solution to the collective action problem.<sup>80</sup> Formal standards, especially laws, serve as focal points, creating common expectations as to appropriate government actions and violations thereof that individuals can rally around.<sup>81</sup> Non-governmental organizations often refer to these international obligations when mobilizing collective demands, drawing on the law to convince dissatisfied actors of the importance

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<sup>74</sup>See also Ritter and Conrad 2016a.

<sup>75</sup>Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Cederman, Wimmer, and Min 2010; Gurr 1970; Muller 1985; Weede 1987.

<sup>76</sup>Lohmann 1994; Shadmehr and Bernhardt 2011.

<sup>77</sup>Lichbach 1995.

<sup>78</sup>Olson 1965.

<sup>79</sup>Klandermans 1984; Klandermans and Oegema 1987; Kuran 1991; Lichbach 1995; Snow et al. 1986.

<sup>80</sup>Bell, Bhasin, et al. 2014; Dai 2005; Dodson 2015; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999; Simmons 2009.

<sup>81</sup>J. M. Carey 2000; Dai 2005; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Weingast 1997.

of an issue and the country's obligation to respond.<sup>82</sup> These studies suggest that government obligation to human rights treaties may lower individuals' expected costs of solving the collective action problem, thus leading to realization of more challenges.<sup>83</sup>

Although previous literature examines how law influences mobilization processes, there has been little research into the effect of treaty law on dissent. Dissent is different from mobilization; whereas mobilization indicates that individuals are coordinating, dissent indicates that they have directed that coordination against the government.<sup>84</sup> To draw an analogy from international conflict, just because a country has an army does not mean it will necessarily fight a battle. There is thus a great deal to be learned from how international human rights treaties may or may not affect actual dissent activities.

By considering how human rights treaties affect conflict between the government and potential dissidents, we uncover a new mechanism by which these treaties affect dissent. Institutions that constrain repression have a structural effect on dissent, altering the incentive framework within which dissidents make decisions. Individuals and groups considering dissent look for external cues as to the likely success of their efforts, strategically acting when leaders are likely to be constrained by (international) legal concerns. A treaty commitment modifies how decisions to dissent are made based on the potential dissidents' expectations about two factors: (1) the likelihood that a treaty will create consequences that a repressive actor would otherwise not incur, and (2) the propensity of government authorities to repress. If leaders would not repress the opposition regardless of their behavior, then an institution changes neither the expectation of repression nor dissidents' behavior. However, dissidents' behavior does change as a result of treaties in certain situations: people should expect that treaty obligations have the strongest constraining effects on repression when leaders face

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<sup>82</sup>Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999.

<sup>83</sup>Dai 2005; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Simmons 2009.

<sup>84</sup>Mobilized dissent materializes in two stages. First, individuals decide whether to pool their resources and efforts to act collectively (mobilization). Second, dissidents threaten to or actually carry out actions that impose costs on the government in an effort to alter the status quo (dissent). Throughout this book, we refer to the process of individuals joining a group and pooling their resources as mobilization and the action the group takes or threatens to take against the government as dissent. We treat these processes as distinct (though connected) decisions.

few domestic institutional constraints and when they value office highly enough to repress at will, and under these conditions, treaties lead to more dissent. Although international treaties can act as focal points to facilitate coordination,<sup>85</sup> we argue that these institutions also change the structural game dissidents are playing.

This picture of mobilized dissent is consistent with both the resource mobilization and political opportunity theories of social movements. Resource mobilization theory argues that protest movements emerge and succeed when there are resources and organization to allow groups to form, expand, and act. According to this theory, when leaders or groups are able to reduce the costs of mobilization, increase the benefits of mobilization, or provide information about each, more people will join the movement and its actions will be more effective.<sup>86</sup> Other scholars argue that resource mobilization is not enough to predict when dissidents will act and whether movements will succeed. In addition to needing to mobilize resources, they assert, dissident groups must also look for political openings: events or institutions that weaken or constrain leaders, making them more likely to concede, accommodate, or change policies, and less likely to repress the dissidents.<sup>87</sup> Tarrow (1994, p. 18) writes, “political opportunity structures are ‘consistent dimensions of the political environment which either encourage or discourage people from using collective action.’ ”

International human rights treaties represent such a dimension, encouraging people to act collectively toward changes in the status quo. Treaties open opportunities for dissent, since dissidents anticipate a lower probability that they will be repressed for their action than if the treaty were absent. Perversely, by creating space for dissidents to increase dissent, governments may be further motivated to repress dissent. Like others who combine social movement scholarship with conflict studies,<sup>88</sup> we argue that to understand mobilized dissent—and specifically the effect of treaties on mobilized dissent—we must place it within a framework of contentious politics. Political opportunities, like international legal obligations,

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<sup>85</sup>Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Simmons 2009; Vreeland 2008a.

<sup>86</sup>Klandermans 1984; Klandermans and Oegema 1987; Kuran 1991; Snow et al. 1986.

<sup>87</sup>McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996.

<sup>88</sup>inter alia, Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Schock 2005; Weinstein 2007; E. J. Wood 2003.

change the decision environment for both governments and dissidents, whose respective decisions are strategic and intertwined. We therefore build from and extend political opportunity theory, carefully considering the role of contention in that opportunity.

### 2.3.3 Human rights treaties and the law

In legal scholarship, most examinations of international treaties focus on the interpretation and application of law in international and domestic courts.<sup>89</sup> Legal standards and norms require that international laws are most often adjudicated in domestic courts (international courts are for the last resort), and that is especially the case when it comes to cases against individuals accused of violating a law. Domestic courts either invoke and support international standards or they are not; if not, conventional scholarly arguments suggest that international laws cannot influence behavioral outcomes.<sup>90</sup> Other scholars consider whether the international legal institution would actually be invoked by bringing violators to trial; if not, these scholars argue that the institution will have failed to meet its goals.<sup>91</sup>

In similar fashion, we argue that the primary mechanism by which international human rights treaties constrain leaders is through domestic legal consequences, but we argue that the courts play a different role in the international constraint process. Again, most scholars argue that domestic courts are the arbiter of international law. In practice, the domestic judiciary rarely references or implements international treaties in particular cases. Indeed, courts are often slow to constrain government discrimination and other human rights violations.<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, we argue that domestic courts are important for identifying the influence of international law on government behavior because they mitigate popular expectations of constraint. The courts' effect isn't on the government directly, but on the expectations of potential dissenters: in treaty-obligated nations, dissenters think that courts will punish repression under international standards, so they are then more willing to engage in dissent.

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<sup>89</sup>e.g., Hathaway 2007.

<sup>90</sup>e.g., Sloss 2009.

<sup>91</sup>e.g., Goldsmith 2003; Goldsmith and Krasner 2003.

<sup>92</sup>Rosenberg 1991.

Assuming simply that the international obligation increases the expectation (by leaders and potential dissidents) that violations will be met by litigation and court-related costs, we find that international HRTs have a limiting effect on repression, even when the domestic court system is relatively ineffective. These expectations of court constraint are often supported by behavioral evidence (more cases being brought to trial, more NGO activity around international laws, changes in domestic laws to reflect the obligation), but they need not be; expectations change even in the absence of evidence of court constraint. Early survey data suggests that people believe that international treaties are likely to create costs for authorities who violate rights, even in places where international human rights law is rarely considered in domestic policies or court decisions.

In fact, international treaties have their strongest effect on human rights outcomes when countries lack the domestic legal mechanisms to constrain leaders. This runs counter to existing scholarly research, which argues that courts need to be effective to enforce treaty obligations.<sup>93</sup> As we show in our formal theory, governments in countries with strong courts already repress at lower levels than those with weak courts, and a treaty obligation does little to change that constraint environment. But in low-constraint environments, treaty obligations alter expectations a great deal. Our model indicates that when all other conditions remain the same, a state with weak courts that is obligated to a treaty engages in repression less than it would if it were not so obligated. In these low-constraint states, treaty obligations affect both repressive behavior from the state and dissent behavior from the people, changing the entire conflict. It is this change in the conflict, we posit, that causes these countries to reduce violations in line with treaty terms.

In short, we approach the way in which international law affects domestic outcomes by examining not domestic law but societal and governmental behaviors. This, we argue, is because international human rights treaties can affect outcomes even if they do not directly and observably either change court behavior or the implementation of laws. To decrease

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<sup>93</sup>e.g., Powell and Staton 2009; Simmons 2009.

government repression, treaties need only influence the expectations of those things.

### Human rights treaties and advocacy

While social scientists and legal scholars tend to focus on interactions between elite institutions and leaders or the application of legal processes to complex and obtuse policies, human rights activists know that the question of rights protections versus violations frequently comes down to simple interactions between dissidents and government authorities. We bring the question of constraining institutions to the ground level, giving those who design institutions a better understanding of the implications of their designs in the actual field, and enabling those advocating for rights protection to demand the institutions that best improve rights outcomes.

Our findings run counter to the dominant trend of scholarship; we find that international human rights treaties have a positive effect on rights protections when governments are most motivated to repress. International law has only a small influence on perceptions of domestic politics, but it is enough to yield a substantive, meaningful reduction in rights violations when leaders are highly invested in keeping power. This finding buttresses the efforts of those who advocate for international institutions as solutions in countries with poor domestic barriers to rights violations. In contrast to Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui (2007), we find that international human rights treaties have the strongest effects where they are most needed—where conflict and repression are most likely to occur, unconstrained by other institutions.

Because they influence both repression and dissent, international human rights treaties have potentially conflicting effects: When they are most effective at constraining government violations of human rights, they provide incentives for mobilized dissidents to take action against the government. International law creates openings for more effective dissent, which is particularly appealing when the call for change to the status quo is connected to improved human rights. Although we argue that dissent should be more likely to occur regardless of the substance of the dissidents' particular policy demands, this is a useful side effect for

advocates supporting rights protections across the globe.

For all of the good news about treaties presented in the book, their effects on government repression are not always large and are limited to a subset of states. And critically, the effect of an international institution depends on the status of an extant domestic institution: the judiciary. Very consistently, our findings suggest that domestic courts are much more effective than treaties at constraining government leaders from engaging in repression. Practitioners would do well to increase the effectiveness of the domestic judiciary, but if they cannot, international treaties can help to constrain the worst violators of human rights.

## 2.4 Organization of the book

In this book, we explore when and how human rights treaty obligations affect a leader's decision to repress, focusing on the domestic institutional and behavioral enforcement of international obligations to protect people from government abuse. Institutions that create costs for violating rights do not affect government entities in isolation; instead, they change the decision-making calculus for all actors in a domestic conflict—both the leader and dissidents within the population. As such, we shift the analytical focus of study from the more traditional concentration on government decision-making to a dynamic and innovative model of domestic conflict between government leaders and an opposing population.

The theory and empirical analyses presented in Parts II and III explain why international human rights treaties curb human rights violations under some conditions but not others. The theory is based on a formal model of conflict between government authorities and potential dissidents, which is presented in Chapter 3. Highlighting two interconnected decisions—the leader's choice to repress and the dissidents' choice to dissent—we paint a picture of how domestic conflict plays out in the absence of an international obligation to protect human rights. In doing so, we establish a counterfactual to which we can compare the same theoretical country if it were bound to a minimal expectation that violations would

be punished. This conceptual exercise allows us to derive theoretical predictions related to three human rights-related outcomes, which we discuss in Chapter 4:

1. the effect of an international human rights treaty on the likelihood of government repression,
2. the effect of an international human rights treaty on the likelihood of mobilized dissent, and
3. the likelihood that a government will ratify an international human rights treaty, given its anticipated effects on conflict.

Part III presents a series of statistical analyses in support of our claims that treaties meaningfully reduce repression and increase dissent. These analyses examine several international human rights treaties and their effects on government repression and mobilized dissent. In Chapter 5, we translate our theoretical concepts into measurements and describe the methodological approach we take to analyzing the implications of the theory. Our statistical models echo the structure of the data-generating process we assume in the formal theory: Countries select into non-random samples of treaty obligation status, and we draw inferences as to the effect of the treaty by comparing the actors' conflict behaviors to what they would have done if they had been assigned to the other group. For example, we compare repression and dissent activity in non-signatory countries to what our theory implies would have occurred had that same country committed to an international treaty. We also compare conflict outcomes using the opposite counterfactual, by determining what would have occurred in treaty-obligated countries had they failed to commit to a treaty.

We estimate and interpret the effect of a government obligation to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), and the UN Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) on the likelihood of repression (Chapter 6) and dissent (Chapter 7). In Chapter 6, we find empirical support

for the implications of our theory for government repression: Leaders committed to international treaties who are secure in power repress less than they would if they were not bound to a treaty's terms, but the international obligation has no identifiable effect on leaders who are more vulnerable to turnover. The CAT has the weakest effect on government behavior, with stronger effects from obligation to both the ICCPR and the CEDAW, but all treaties exhibit consistent, robust effects according to our conditional expectations. In Chapter 7, we examine the likelihood that the government will face mobilized dissent from one or more groups of dissidents in the population. We find that state obligation to an international human rights treaty leads to a meaningful increase in mobilized dissent when people expect it to influence repression outcomes—when leaders are secure and courts are ineffective. If the judiciary is relatively effective or the leader is vulnerable to removal, treaty obligation does little to constrain the executive beyond the constraints they would already face at home. Under these conditions, the government obligation to an international human rights treaty has no meaningful effect on mobilized dissent.

Because treaties intended to curb state repression can, in some states, have domestic political effects that perversely incentivize more conflict, we discuss in Chapter 8 the policy implications of our research for those seeking to create institutions to better protect human rights. The conclusion also highlights a number of ways in which our theory's implications could extend to elements of domestic politics that this book does not explicitly examine. For instance, we discuss what our theory has to say about the likelihood that different types of countries will ratify international treaties. We also propose an extension of the theory in which the domestic court acts as a strategic player, (perhaps) in opposition to the executive. Finally, we discuss the assumptions about institutions that explain why treaties have the effects we predict, considering how to apply the theory to various international and even domestic institutions that seek to constrain human rights violations.

In summary, this book fills a critical gap in the scholarship on international human rights law specifically and on government repression more generally, introducing dynamic, multi-

actor considerations to a largely state-centric literature. From a social science perspective, our approach is novel, combining two literatures on human rights questions—one focused on institutional constraints and another focused on the behavioral conflict dynamics that determine repression—that until now have remained separate from one other. Practitioners should see our approach not as the sterile creation of abstract institutions that may or not effectively impose costs on repressive leaders, but as an accurate reflection of “on the ground” conflict dynamics. Our theory recognizes that binding leaders with domestic and international constraints is not enough to improve human rights, for doing so may also change the domestic threats that leaders face. These changes do not always reduce violations of human rights writ large, but in many important situations they help protect vulnerable citizens from being abused by their governments.

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