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# Collective Action Under Repressive Conditions: Integration of Individual, Group, and Structural Level Research, Recommendations, and Reflections

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## ABSTRACT

Social scientific research from different traditions on collective action under repressive conditions is fragmented across different levels of analysis. The current paper takes a first step toward remedying this fragmentation by reviewing research findings on repression and collective action and organizing them into a multilevel framework. We describe the impact of repression on antecedents of collective action at the (a) individual level (including grievances, emotions, efficacy beliefs, politicized identity, and individual differences), (b) group level (including community cohesion and norms), and (c) structural level (including political opportunities and socioecological conditions). We then present an integrative summary reflecting on the broad patterns we observed in the literature. We conclude with policy implications of this work, suggesting recommendations for activists to overcome repression, for authorities to foster pluralist political participation while maintaining stability, and for researchers to further advance knowledge on repression and collective action.

## 1 | Introduction

Repression, broadly conceptualized as a multifaceted, multilevel phenomenon that seeks to "prevent, control, or constrain non-institutional collective action (e.g., protest), including its initiation" (Earl 2011, 263), is increasing across the globe (V-Dem Institute 2021). As we write this, massive acts of protest supporting the Palestinian cause around the world are subject to repressive measures in so-called liberal democracies (e.g., France, Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom; Adu and Quinn 2024; Boffey 2024; Chan 2023; McGreal 2023; Shamir 2023). Similarly, climate activists in Europe are facing increased repression, including draconian prison sentences (UNECE 2024). Even in authoritarian political contexts—where engagement in anti-state activism almost always involves substantial personal risks—there have been widespread protests over the past decades (e.g., the Arab Spring uprisings, uprisings in Hong Kong, Chile, and Brazil; the Woman, Life, Freedom movement in Iran; Bevins 2023). How do we explain this seeming paradox, and how does repression shape engagement in collective action, that is, actions one engages in as an individual or a representative of one's group to improve the group's conditions, power, or status (Agostini and van Zomeren 2021; Wright et al. 1990)? Through which individual, group-level, and structural processes does repression impact people's engagement in such actions to bring about social change? Finally, what practical and policy implications do these insights generate that can help counter the negative impact of repression on progressive social change?

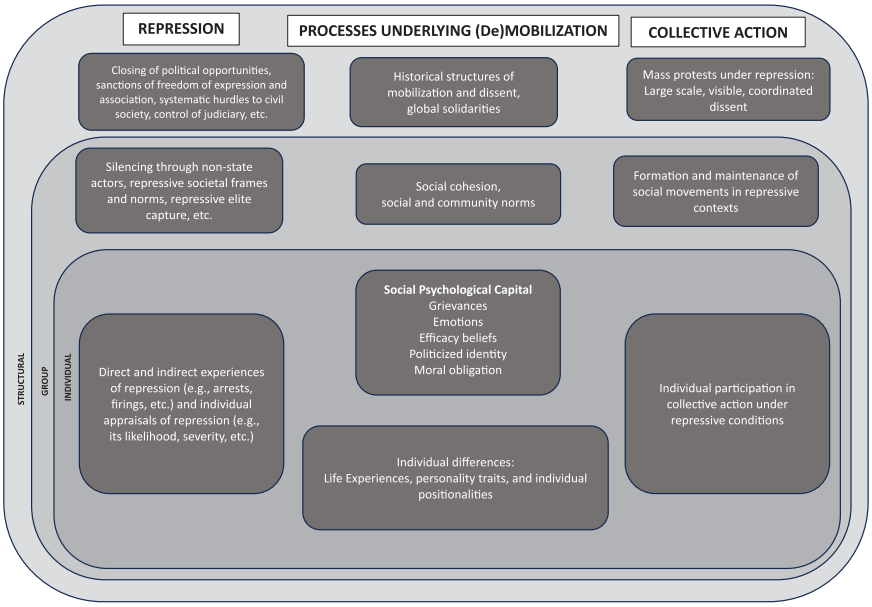


**FIGURE 1** | Collective action under repressive conditions: Integration of individual, group, and structural level factors.

Sociological and political science research has examined repression at the structural and group levels in varying contexts, such as legal restrictions or censorship and curtailment of civil society organizations, that mobilize or demobilize collective action (Corcoran et al. 2011; Dalton et al. 2010). Social psychological research has only recently begun to investigate how repressive conditions impact the individual-level processes, such as emotions and efficacy beliefs, that motivate peoples' engagement in collective action (see Ayanian et al. 2024 for a review). However, across these levels of analysis, the research has produced mixed findings, showing that repression is sometimes linked to increased and sometimes to decreased action, sometimes has a nonlinear relationship with action, and sometimes has no effect. These contradictory findings are often referred to as the "repression paradox" (Kurtz and Smithey 2018) or the "punishment puzzle" (Davenport 2007), or the "backlash effect" (when repression enhances resistance, for example, Li et al. 2024). These complex findings can be attributed, at least in part, to the lack of integrative and interdisciplinary theorizing that analyses the impacts of repression at the structural, group, and individual levels (Adra and Li 2024). Despite numerous calls for more integration (Adra and Li 2024; Bou Zeineddine and Leach 2022; Opp 2010), findings from different research traditions and at different levels of analysis remain fragmented. This limits the development of a theory that adequately captures the complexity of collective action and the validity of practical recommendations from this scholarship.

The current paper takes a first step toward remedying this problem in the literature by reviewing and organizing research findings on repression and collective action into a multilevel summary framework (see Figure 1). This framework is based on integrative, social psychological models of collective action that synthesize the most robust predictors of collective action at individual and group levels and acknowledge that collective action is always embedded in and shaped by specific cultural, political, and economic (structural) contexts (e.g., Agostini and van Zomeren 2021; Bou Zeineddine and Leach 2022; Thomas et al. 2022).

We first define key concepts and delineate the focus of our review. Second, we review the literature on the impact of repression at three levels of analysis, considering (a) individual-level predictors of collective action (including grievances, efficacy beliefs, emotions, identity, moral obligation, life experiences, and other individual differences), (b) group-level antecedents of collective action (including community cohesion and norms), and (c) structural antecedents of collective action. Third, we present an integrative summary reflecting on broad patterns we observed in the literature. We conclude with reflections on the implications of this work for activists, authorities, and researchers. For activists, we suggest ways to counter repression to maintain or build mobilization efforts. For authorities, we propose policy recommendations cautioning power holders from engaging in repression and encouraging more pluralist and decentralized participatory democratic processes. For researchers, we highlight important directions for future research on repressed collective action to address current research limitations.

## 2 | Key Concepts and Review Scope

### 2.1 | Repression

Repression can refer to an objective reality (Davenport 2007) entailing institutional structures and actions (e.g., surveillance, laws, police violence) or a subjective experience (Honari 2018) involving individual perceptions and appraisals (e.g., the perceived likelihood of repression and emotional reactions to it) (Ayanian and Tausch 2016), stemming from objective instances of repression. Repression can occur in all political systems to

varying degrees and is not unique to authoritarian regimes. Even supposedly democratic states engage in repression of protests and social movements when these threaten existing power structures (e.g., Fisher et al. 2023; The Guardian 2023; UN 2019). We therefore do not dichotomize "repressive" and "non-repressive" contexts or conditions but consider repression on a spectrum from low to high levels.

At the structural level, repression has been conceptualized as the degree to which political opportunities are available to those who challenge the system (Tarrow 2011). Regimes can be more or less responsive to constituents' demands and can impose more or fewer risks and costs on those who engage in collective action, for instance, through laws prohibiting certain types of action (Goodwin 2001; Wood 2003) or proscribing/outlawing particular groups. Researchers have operationalized repression at the structural level by quantifying[1] country-level characteristics, such as the extent to which the state systematically silences civil society (e.g., by employing material sanctions like fines and firings, or physical and psychological punishments like arrests, trials, beatings, threats to relatives), sanctions freedoms of expression and association, and establishes hurdles to the emergence of new oppositional groups (e.g., by establishing burdensome registration procedures, legal harassment), or generally attempts to destroy any collective manifestation of dissent (Varieties of Democracies Project; Michael et al. 2019).

Group-level repression, in contrast, includes means to silence oppositional voices in the public sphere through non-state actors (e.g., "collaborative" para-statal institutions, civil society organizations and think tanks, supportive networks and elites, as well as religious or elite institutions; Cunningham et al. 2019; Earl 2003; Massoumi 2021; Ong 2018; Pichardo 1995) who function in the space between national-level institutions and citizens and between transnational networks, foreign states or organizations, and citizens (Kenwick and Lemcke 2023). Group-level repression can be enacted through societal and group-level frames, norms, and actions (Davenport 2005; D. Moss 2014), such as the stigmatization of collective identities that mobilize social movements (Ferre 2005), self-censorship based on fear of negative repercussions (Lynch and Telhami 2023), or repressive tactics through paramilitaries, mercenaries, and vigilante organizations that operate outside of official institutions and structures (e.g., Rauta 2020).

Finally, scholars have conceptualized repression at the individual level as people's perceptions of the likelihood (Ayanian and Tausch 2016; Honari and Muis 2021), type (e.g., Cobbina et al. 2019), proximity (Adam-Troian et al. 2020), and severity (e.g., Curtice and Behlendorf 2021) of repression (Anderson et al. 2002; Opp and Roehl 1990) or the risks associated with authorities' repression of protest (Opp 1994). For example, Ayanian et al. (2021) asked activists in repressive contexts about the likelihood of imprisonment or injury when participating in collective action. In addition to operationalizing repression at the individual-level with self-reported appraisals, researchers have also operationalized repression as the direct or indirect experiences of repression of collective action (Earl 2011), such as experiences with police brutality (Li et al. 2024).

### 2.2 | Collective Action

Collective action is often contrasted with conventional political participation (e.g., voting; Quaranta 2017) and can encompass a wide spectrum of actions, including protests, strikes, and revolutions. Like repression, it can be conceptualized at individual, group, and societal levels of analysis (see Figure 1). Collective action addresses group grievances, which can include the ingroup's grievances (i.e., self-(group) protective, van Zomeren et al. 2008), such as an Egyptian activist participating in protests to topple an authoritarian regime in Egypt, and actions addressing other groups' grievances (i.e., allyship; Kutlaca et al. 2020), such as a British activist participating in protests in the United Kingdom to end the genocidal war on Palestine. We acknowledge there are some differences in the factors that motivate collective action for ingroup versus other groups' grievances (see Saab et al. 2015); however, given the scarcity of research on allyship under repression, we focus on how repression affects antecedents of political dissent broadly, without distinguishing between self-protective collective action and allyship. Our review includes research on both overt, offline (e.g., demonstrations, protests, signing petitions), and online (e.g., use of social media for mobilization) collective actions. While previous research has distinguished collective actions in terms of their normativity with respect to societal rules and conventions (Tausch et al. 2011), we refrain from this distinction here as norms of collective action change and different forms of collective action often co-occur dynamically, especially in contexts of repression (Uysal et al. 2024). For example, collective action may escalate and become more violent when initially peaceful protests are met with violent police repression (Saavedra and Drury 2024). Therefore, rather than categorically distinguishing between normative or nonnormative, violent or nonviolent, and confrontational or nonconfrontational actions, we consider these tactics to be on a continuum of participation and not mutually exclusive (Uysal et al. 2024; Zúñiga et al. 2023).

## 3 | The Effects of Repression on the Antecedents of Collective Action

In the following sections, we discuss the impact of repression on factors that mobilize or demobilize engagement in collective action. We first consider how repression shapes the most commonly studied, individual-level antecedents of collective action (e.g., grievances, efficacy beliefs; see Agostini and van Zomeren 2021; Thomas et al. 2022), and also its impact on life experiences and individual differences that have been linked to collective action engagement. Next, we focus on the impact of repression on group-level factors, particularly social cohesion, which we define as social bonds tying together individuals within a community (Dekker and Bolt 2005), and social norms related to collective action, that is, socially shared expectations and practices (e.g., Schultz et al.2018) related to engagement. Finally, we discuss the impact of repression on societal and structural factors that (de)mobilize collective action, including socioecological and economic conditions, as well as national and international power relations. While we organize repression and the processes underlying deterring versus mobilizing collective action at three levels of analysis (i.e., individual, group, structural), this does

not necessarily imply that repression affects these levels singly or uniquely in the examples we discuss in each section. Moreover, although we cover these factors separately, we acknowledge that there are likely interrelations between the different factors at the same and different levels of analysis. The sections simply organize the review around the focus of different research areas.

## 3.1 | Repression Affecting Individual-Level Antecedents of Collective Action

### 3.1.1 | Commonly Studied Antecedents of Collective Action

Substantial empirical evidence shows that repression affects the most commonly studied individual-level predictors of collective action, namely grievances, emotions, efficacy beliefs, identity, and moral obligation (Ayanian et al. 2024; Thomas et al. 2022).

**3.1.1.1 | Grievances.** Grievances—the violated expectations regarding personal, group, or societal conditions that create a sense of injustice and unfairness (H. J. Smith et al. 2012)—are significant motivators of collective action (Gurr 1968; Simon and Klandermans 2001; van Zomeren et al. 2008). The mobilizing versus demobilizing effect of repression partially depends on whether repression increases or decreases perceived grievances. Synthesizing research from Central and Eastern European, Middle Eastern, and North African countries, Adra and Li (2024) suggest that state repression at the structural level may increase perceived injustice. People often accurately perceive human rights conditions and violations in their countries (Anderson et al. 2002) and experience anger and outrage towards the state or other "emboldening emotions" (Pearlman 2013).

That said, structural repression may also decrease overall levels of perceived injustice, in line with the idea that people are more motivated to defend the systems they live in when they are more controlled by or dependent on these systems' authorities, as proposed by system justification theory (Jost et al. 2015). For example, in a study that collected data from two representative samples of Hungarians in 2010 and 2018, Lönnqvist et al. (2021) compared participants' system justification beliefs while Hungary was a relatively stable democracy (i.e., in 2010) to a time when it was effectively an authoritarian regime (i.e., in 2018; see Bogaards 2018). Following the country's shift from democracy into authoritarianism, participants—regardless of their endorsement of the party that led this authoritarian shift—were less inclined than before to believe that "Hungarian society needs to be radically restructured," pointing to a higher justification of the Hungarian system. These findings illustrate the potential role of structural repression in heightening system justification and subsequently lowering individuals' grievances.

Group-level repression, which includes delegitimizing a social movement through othering, such as portraying protesters as extremists or motivated by foreign agendas, has been argued to deter collective action by reducing the perceived injustice of repressive state action (Saab et al. 2024). While this may not entirely alleviate grievances, it can signal that the movement does not represent the ingroup or that it cannot be trusted to address the injustice. Other group-level factors can reduce grievances by legitimizing the authorities and the status quo. This can occur when institutions (e.g., religious, civil society organizations, elites, and elite organizations) endorse and cooperate with the repressive authorities, expressing shared values (e.g., aligning the values and philosophy of religious institutions with government's practices) or expressing common rhetoric (e.g., symbols, discourse) with the authorities (Luft 2020). The delegitimization of dissenting voices and the bolstering of the state through these actions reduces the impetus to act among people who might otherwise have joined the protests.

Furthermore, to reduce perceptions of injustice and increase citizens' sense of political agency (i.e., reduce the likelihood of grievances), regimes strategically design indoctrinating narratives (e.g., glorifying the ingroup, scapegoating, authority legitimizing myths, meritocratic social mobility narratives), use pacifying performances and distractions ("bread and circuses"), and leverage democratic-procedural veils for legitimization of their rule (e.g., sham elections in electoral autocracies and nonrepresentative elections in democracies) (Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017)—all in service of preventing collective action. Such mechanisms are especially leveraged at points of transition or change (critical junctures, see Liu and Pratto 2018). For example, an analysis of North Korean state media showed a strategic shift in emphasizing state strength, ideology, and achievements around the transition in leadership to Kim Jong Un (Boussalis et al. 2023).

At the individual level, research points to the ability of perceived repression to engender backlash effects (i.e., further mobilization) by increasing grievances against the authorities (Ayanian and Tausch 2016; Ayanian et al. 2021; Hess and Martin 2006). Social psychological studies of the Egyptian revolution (Ayanian and Tausch 2016), dissent in Russia, Ukraine, and Turkey (Ayanian et al. 2021), and the 2019 movements in Hong Kong and Chile (Ayanian et al. 2021; Li et al. 2024) have supported this pattern. Findings have shown that increased perceptions of risks and costs associated with repression at the individual level (e.g., likelihood of being arrested) and actual experiences with repression at the personal level (e.g., experiencing police violence) have the power to increase participation in collective action, via a heightened sense of grievances (see Opp and Roehl 1990, on micromobilization).

Overall, research points to some forms of repression that can decrease perceptions of grievance and thereby demobilize collective action, through increasing justification of the system and perceptions of the authorities' legitimacy, as well as movement delegitimizing narratives, and other rhetorical and symbolic tools. Conversely, repression is less likely to succeed or may even mobilize collective action when it does not decrease grievances or when it increases them. This is more likely to happen with reactive forms of repression, referring to the authorities' immediate and forceful reaction to suppress ongoing protests (Tanneberg 2019), particularly when experienced at the individual level (e.g., police violence). Crucially, whether the authorities are successful at censoring information and disseminating dominant narratives that legitimize them and delegitimize the opposition, and whether, conversely, social movements can produce solid counter-narratives and establish alternative sources of information (particularly ones that document and disseminate

information about state repression), likely shapes the role of grievances in demobilizing versus mobilizing collective action (Adra and Li 2024; Saab et al. 2024).

**3.1.1.2 | Emotions.** Grievances are important motivators of action as they arouse emotions—physiological and psychological activity patterns that prepare an organism to respond effectively to environmental demands (Keltner and Gross 1999). Distinct emotions (e.g., anger vs. fear) arise from subjective appraisals of an event and guide distinct types of behavior. Depending on which emotions (or combination of emotions) repression incites, it can either mobilize or deter collective action. Qualitative and quantitative research shows that individuals often feel *anger* and *moral outrage* about repression. Moral outrage is an action-oriented emotional reaction to perceived transgressions of one's moral values (Batson et al. 2007) and is considered to be an even stronger motivator of action compared to nonmoral emotions (see Lodewijkx et al. 2008) since perceived moral violations generate a drive to act defensively (Skitka 2010). Both anger and moral outrage strongly predict participation in high-risk collective action (Ayanian et al. 2024). Additionally, repression (primarily measured as individual appraisals of risk or costs of dissent) activates the empowering emotions of *hate* and *vengeance* as well as *shame*, *humiliation*, and *being ridiculed*, which also contribute to the positive link between repression and collective action (Ayanian et al. 2024).

In addition to fueling collective action through these emotional pathways, perceptions of repression may also act as a threat-thermometer that signals the authorities' readiness to punish dissent and oppositional voices (Adra and Li 2024). For example, repression through threats or implementation of arrests, imprisonment, injuries, killings, torture, job loss, etc., to oneself or close to others can instigate *fear* (Ayanian et al. 2021). While fear is an avoidance emotion that reduces collective action (Miller et al. 2009; Saab and Ayoub 2016) and a mechanism through which repression can dampen resistance (Ayanian et al. 2021; Honari 2018), there is also emerging evidence that the relationship is more complex, which points to likely moderating mechanisms (Ayanian et al. 2024). For instance, the interaction with other emotions complicates this link and may partly be explained by cultural/contextual differences, or whether activists or nonactivists are studied. One example of this is that while fear dampened the link between anger and collective action intentions among migrant domestic workers in Lebanon (Adra et al. 2020), former activists in communist Poland reported in qualitative interviews that anger helped them overcome their fear and motivated them to protest (Hager and Krakowski 2022).

Thus, the role of emotions in (de-)mobilizing collective action under repressive conditions is far from straightforward. Importantly, individuals do not feel discrete emotions one at a time but instead hold multiple affective experiences at once. Particular combinations of emotions may be more important in molding collective action than distinct emotions (see work on emotional cultures; e.g., Barsade and O'Neill 2016). When repression-related fear is accompanied by hope, for instance, it may be more likely to engender backlash effects to repression, compared to when it is experienced alongside despair. Research has even shown that protestors in more repressive contexts may simultaneously experience a range of seemingly contradictory emotions, more intensely than non-protestors, including anger, fear, hope, and despair (Al-Anani 2019; Li et al. 2024). How these emotional constellations translate into (de-)mobilization under repression is likely multidetermined. For example, whether anger or outrage emboldens individuals or, conversely, fear and despair debilitate them could depend on levels of identification with the protest movement and the norms of solidarity within the movement (see sections below) as well as group-level and structural processes. In a study of activists in Hong Kong during the Anti-Extradition Bill movement of 2019, exposure to police violence seemed to engender less, rather than more fear (Li et al. 2024). The authors argue that this can be explained by Hong Kong's long tradition of pro-democracy mobilization, and the existence of support structures, such as a strong civil society and a large, visible, and widely supported social movement. In the absence of such favorable conditions for dissent; however, high levels of repression may succeed at instilling fear and thereby dampening collective action.

**3.1.1.3 | Efficacy Beliefs.** Various forms of efficacy, including peoples' belief that their group is capable of improving its situation (e.g., Mummendey et al. 1999), have been shown to predict collective action in various contexts. The literature suggests that the mobilizing versus demobilizing role of repression may depend on how repression influences various efficacy beliefs. Structural repression may demobilize collective action, through decreasing political efficacy (Adra and Li 2024), defined as the perceived likelihood of the protest movement to achieve its political and social goals. Based on cross-country comparisons (e.g., Corcoran et al. 2011; Lavrinenko; 2021) and research in China (Thompson et al. 1990) and former East Germany (Adra and Li (2024), Andrain and Smith 2006) conclude that structural repression can decrease political efficacy because political influence and power is likely restricted to a smaller portion of society (more hierarchical) in contexts with higher levels of state repression (Nathan 2003).

On the group and structural level, Saab et al. (2024) argue, in line with resource mobilization theory (e.g., Edwards and McCarthy 2004), that repressive agents may undermine efficacy perceptions by reducing social movements' access to resources. This can include denying or complicating access to resources such as physical spaces for protesting, media coverage and visibility, and symbolic resources, all of which may influence the perceived ability to achieve the group's goals.

However, other forms of efficacy contribute to the mobilizing role of repression (Ayanian and Tausch 2016; Ayanian et al. 2021), including *identity consolidation efficacy* (i.e., the perceived likelihood of a protest to strengthen and consolidate the protest movement; Saab et al. 2015), *empowerment or solidarity efficacy* (i.e., perceived efficacy in terms of both increasing support and solidarity and empowering the people; Li et al. 2024), and *participative efficacy* (i.e., the likelihood of one's personal efforts contributing incrementally to the protest movement's success; van Zomeren et al. 2013). Higher levels of perceived repression were linked with higher levels of these forms of efficacy among activists and, in turn, higher levels of collective action under repressive conditions.

Qualitative studies in repressive contexts suggest that other personal and group goals beyond the ultimate political goal (e.g., societal change, liberation) are relevant for a sense of efficacy. For example, thematic analyses of testimonies from Holocaust survivors who were part of the armed resistance (e.g., partisan groups, ghetto underground) revealed that they did not perceive a lack of efficacy—instead, their sense of efficacy was based on various other group goals in this context of extreme violence, repression, and existential threat, including undermining the enemy however possible despite the stark power difference, maintaining one's dignity and agency, and acting on behalf of longer term goals and values such as fighting for freedom and humanity even when it was unclear if one would survive to see the outcome (Vollhardt and Kogan 2024).

In sum, while repression can decrease individuals' sense of political efficacy, repression does not necessarily demobilize collective action. In more repressive contexts, the belief that a social movement is capable of achieving its political goals may become secondary to other instrumental or psychological motivations and forms of efficacy, with more ingroup-directed aims, or a more long-term and incremental vision of social change (see Gülsüm Acar et al. 2024; Ayanian et al. 2024).

**3.1.1.4 | Politicized Identity.** As group memberships are important parts of individuals' self-concept and sources of esteem (Tajfel and Turner 1979), unfavorable comparisons to other groups can motivate a range of different coping strategies, including collective action to address group grievances. Therefore, identification with an aggrieved group is a well-established motivator of collective action at the individual level (van Zomeren et al. 2008). Members of aggrieved groups are transformed into political actors by politicizing social identities. This involves the awareness that grievances are shared with others, assigning blame to powerful opponents, and addressing society as a whole or third party to take a position in the power struggle (Simon and Klandermans 2001). Identification with a politicized group (e.g., as a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, a climate activist, or a Make America Great Again supporter) is one of the strongest drivers of individuals' participation in collective actions (van Zomeren et al. 2008). Several lines of work have now demonstrated that protest repression mobilizes collective action in part by strengthening politicized identification because it involves creating a strong sense of shared fate among those experiencing or witnessing repression due to the common threat to all in-group members (see the elaborated social identity model of Crowds; Drury and Reicher 2000; Drury et al. 2012; see also Ayanian et al. 2021).

Contrarily, a look at group-level repression points to the deterring potential of repression through identity-related processes. Group-level repression can target the movement's identity through stigmatization and interpersonal ridicule (Ferree 2005; Massoumi 2021; Osbourne et al. 2016), which can significantly decrease individuals' politicized identity. Additionally, authorities can attempt to infiltrate movements (Dahbi 2014), creating distrust among the movements' members and decreasing their unity and solidarity. This, in turn, can decrease politicized identification and empowerment (Saab et al. 2024) and increase the fear of being targeted by the authorities (Saab et al. 2024).

Furthermore, repression can lead to fragmentation within movements because of disagreements about means or strategies for contesting the repressive powers. However, this fragmentation of movements does not necessarily undermine their success; in fact, research on the radical flank hypothesis (e.g., Simpson et al. 2022), examining the conditions under which radical factions in a movement have a positive or negative effect on the overall success of the movement, suggests that the presence of a more radical faction may help the moderate faction gain support or greater acceptance among observers and the opposition for their demands (Shuman et al. 2024).

Still, elites can use identity leveraging, or the strategic manipulation of social distance between groups for political gain—pitting one group against another through stigmatizing or elevating categories of people along boundaries of race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, gender, class, sexual orientation, or other salient social markers to alter the politicization of identities (Bleich and Morgan 2019; Saab et al. 2024). Elites engage in such identity leveraging to mobilize or demobilize collective action (Haslam and Reicher 2012), to coopt, weaken, or tame movements (e.g., Sika 2019), and to intimidate or eliminate movements entirely (e.g., Albarracin et al. 2023). They are motivated by political gain, self-interest, pressures to appease political power bases, and a will to maintain power structures (e.g., Fearon and Laitin 2000; S. M. Moss 2019). For example, Sudanese elites engineered popular and political discourse through their control of the media to use divide-and-rule strategies (e.g., granting privileges to ingroup communities such as Arab Muslims and inciting relative deprivation in others) to retain control, fostering internecine conflict, and demobilizing opposition to the state (S. M. Moss 2019). Similarly, far-right politicians in the Netherlands used leveraging to promote restrictive immigration policies and demobilize collective action in support of migrants by making statements against Muslims with immigrant backgrounds and justifying these by framing Muslim immigrant groups as a threat to the LGBTQ community. This placed traditional leftist defenders of both LGBTQ and Muslim minority rights in a decisional bind, thus demobilizing potential protest against xenophobia and the far-right, while simultaneously widening their power base by drawing in support from leftist and queer citizens (Bleich and Morgan 2019). South Africa during apartheid provides another example of authorities' use of divide and rule to decrease identification with disadvantaged groups, hence undermining solidarity action. The apartheid government created an "intermediate status" for colored and certain ethnic minorities, with Blacks at the bottom and Whites at the top. This "intermediate status" granted privileges (e.g., better education and housing) but still subjected both groups to discriminatory laws. This division hindered the formation of a unified movement against the apartheid government (Caricati 2018; Dixon et al. 2015).

Whether repression bolsters or quells collective action through identity-related processes may therefore depend on the type of repression. On the one hand, direct and visible repression of a social movement (e.g., through police violence) creates a stronger sense of belonging between dissenters, which may fuel further collective action. On the other hand, softer, more distal repression by the authorities through identity leveraging may weaken people's identification with a social movement, thereby creating challenges for mobilization. However, whether this

demobilization through identity-related repression is successful also likely varies with the history of a social movement, particularly the extent to which it is close-knit and resilient to divisive rhetoric, and the extent to which its members are ideologically aligned (e.g., agreeing on how to respond to repression).

**3.1.1.5 | Moral Obligation.** Within the collective action literature, moral obligation refers to a sense of duty and responsibility to take action (Stürmer et al. 2003; Vilas and Sabucedo 2012). Moral obligation has not received much empirical attention in the repression-collective action puzzle, compared to the other constructs. However, as we consider moral obligation a crucial factor in motivating individuals to engage in repressed action, we briefly summarize the little we know. The limited research confirms the significant role of moral obligation in mobilizing dissent in highly repressive contexts, with a consistent positive link between perceived repression and one's sense of obligation to take action (Ayanian et al. 2021), and moral obligation (Uysal et al. 2022) or a sense of responsibility (Stapnes et al. 2020) motivating individuals to participate in collective action under risky conditions. Furthermore, in several survey studies across different repressive contexts, the perceived likelihood of repression predicted increased moral obligation indirectly, through increases in politicized identity, outrage, and participative efficacy. In turn, moral obligation positively predicted collective action (Ayanian et al. 2021).

### 3.1.2 | Individual Differences

Beyond these social psychological processes that are part of commonly studied collective action models, *life experiences, personality traits, and individual positionality* also shape engagement in collective action and are impacted by repression, as we discuss in the following.

**3.1.2.1 | Life Experiences.** Past experiences with repression, whether direct or vicarious (such as being targeted by police violence or witnessing it used against other ingroup members) are important life experiences that can influence the effects of subsequent repression on collective action (e.g., Al-Anani 2019; Reinka and Leach 2018; Thalhammer 2001). For instance, interviews with senior members of the Muslim Brotherhood revealed how the extremely repressive tactics (e.g., massacres) in the present led some to adopt less confrontational collective action. However, the same extremely repressive tactics led younger members to adopt confrontational collective action (e.g., revolutionary and violent acts, noncompromising and challenging authorities; Al-Anani 2019), suggesting the need to consider other intersecting identities that moderate the effects of such life experiences, through inciting different psychological processes. For instance, for the senior leaders, repression brought back memories of decades of harsh repression coupled with "narratives of patience, endurance, victimhood, and God's revenge" (p. 1337). However, for the younger members, these memories and narratives were absent and repression evoked personal trauma and feelings of outrage and hatred.

Research generally highlights the importance of social networks in providing individuals with knowledge about politics (political socialization; Almond and Verba 1965; Klandermans et al. 2008), and in diffusing information relevant to mobilizing collective opposition (e.g., Andrews and Biggs 2006). Repression can deter mobilization through its impact on social networks, whereby structural repression undermines individuals' capacities to form or maintain oppositional social networks (Davenport 2005; Young 2019). By design, closed political opportunities (Kitshelt 1986), along with restrictions on freedom of association and assembly and the securitization of public spaces and surveillance of constituents' daily lives (Aston 2017), all limit the resources available for dissident groups.

That said, at the individual level, repression sometimes seems to fail to deter mobilization via embeddedness. In fact, people with a family history of engagement in repressed resistance movements are more likely to participate in collective action under repressive conditions (Cornejo et al. 2021; Lawrence 2016). Similarly, being embedded in a social network (e.g., friends, family) of activists or politically active people also makes it more likely that people will participate in collective action despite severe repression (Lawrence 2016). For example, a content-analytic study comparing Jewish Holocaust survivors who were involved in collective resistance (e.g., partisan groups, ghetto underground groups) with those who engaged in individual resistance tactics (such as hiding and passing as non-Jewish), suggested that people who joined collective resistance efforts were more likely to come from politically active and leftist families, in addition to having friends or family who were involved in collective resistance during the Holocaust (Vollhardt and Bilewicz 2024). These socialization effects may occur through exposure to narratives (Cornejo et al. 2021) and information about repression and resistance in one's social networks and family, which raises critical awareness of injustices and may make people more likely to act against injustices despite repression (Lawrence 2016), in addition to being exposed to role models of resistance (Vollhardt and Bilewicz 2024).

**3.1.2.2 | Personality Traits and Individual Differences.** As an additional influence on the individual level, the literature suggests personality variables that help explain why people respond differently to repression. For instance, a longitudinal study in Hong Kong showed that higher risk tolerance and pro-sociality predicted a greater likelihood of participating in protests despite repression (Cantoni et al. 2019). Conversely, cross-country comparisons show that macro-level repression may dampen people's global sense of personal efficacy, that is, the extent to which they believe they have general control over their environment (Sherrill and Vogler 1982). This can lead to political apathy and fatalism (Abdelgawad and Magued 2022), and subsequently stifle dissent (e.g., Corcoran et al. 2011).

**3.1.2.3 | Individual Positionalities.** Even though people in repressive contexts are all at higher risk, variations in power and vulnerability to these risks exist within the same group due to differences in intersecting social positionalities (e.g., Briggs et al. 2009). For example, interviews with middle-class Chileans who were initially bystanders in the Pinochet regime's repressions revealed how privilege based on class and age created different realities for Chileans at the time, and how central it was to the consciousness raising and politicization of privileged Chileans to have dialogue and develop empathy with close others who were less privileged and directly victimized (Diaz 2020). Individual

positionalities may therefore increase collective action as they affect how likely one is to be oppressed and repressed.

In sum, the literature shows that whether repression has a mobilizing or a deterring effect largely depends on whether the social psychological motivators of collective action (e.g., grievances, efficacy beliefs, empowering emotions) are high, and the inhibitors of collective action (e.g., fear, system justifying beliefs) are low, a combination Saab et al. (2024) refer to as the social psychological capital of collective action. Repression is less likely to succeed if counter-repression efforts can (a) replenish motivators of collective action when those are threatened or eroded by repression and (b) weaken inhibitors of collective action that are activated by repression (Saab et al. 2024). Furthermore, other individual differences, including life experiences, personality traits, and individual positionality, can further define why individuals react differently to the same repressive conditions.

## 3.2 | Repression Affecting Group-Level Antecedents of Collective Action

At the group level, repression impacts two crucial characteristics of peoples' immediate environments and everyday interactions that mobilize or demobilize collective action: social cohesion and social norms.

### 3.2.1 | Social Cohesion and Social Norms

Community cohesion is "the glue" that holds individual community members together (Dekker and Bolt 2005). It involves social networks and interactions between group or community members as well as psychological appraisals such as trust and feelings of belonging (see Penić et al. 2024). Social cohesion predicts broad political engagement (Putnam 2007) and collective action (El Kurd 2022). Simply put, the tighter community ties are, the more tenable large-scale collective oppositional action is. One mechanism through which community cohesion influences collective action under repression is community norms (Penić et al. 2024).

Social norms have been conceptualized as "social frames of reference" (Sherif 1937). They indicate what is perceived as common or desirable in a given group or community (Chung and Rimal 2016). Norms uniquely explain behavior, beyond individuals' attitudes (Ajzen 2012), and therefore are a crucial (but understudied) piece of the puzzle of collective action (Baumert and Schmitt 2016; Cohen and Valencia 2008; Prentice and Paluck 2020). Of particular interest in explaining collective action under repression are solidarity norms (i.e., "expectations of solidarity and support from ingroup members"; Penić et al. 2024, 8), norms of support for participating in collective action among close others, and (historical) norms of resistance that are transmitted through group narratives and can be part of a group's identity content (e.g., Reicher et al. 2006; Selvanathan et al. 2023).

Very little research has explored whether and how repression influences social cohesion and community norms over time. On the one hand, a social psychological process that may account for the mobilizing effect of repression via group-level processes is that repression may strengthen community ties when people feel united with others risking or facing repression and rely on their networks to cope with the costs and repercussions of repression. For example, among Palestinian refugees, *sumud* and *kama muta* (being moved by love and communal spirit) intensify communal sharing relationships in response to a crisis (Rmeileh 2021). In addition to shaping solidarity and support norms within the community, repression also shapes norms of how to engage with the repressive authorities, and the type of collective action individuals engage in. When authorities use repression, norms for more confrontational collective action are often enabled (Saavedra and Drury 2024; Uysal et al. 2024). Furthermore, repression may be less likely to demobilize when solidarity structures exist. For example, Saab et al. (2024) argued that the presence of activist legal aid during the Lebanese 2019 uprising for arrested protesters, as well as protests for releasing detained protesters, may have helped maintain protest in the face of repression, reducing perceived risks of protesting due to such solidarity structures.

On the other hand, repression may demobilize collective action via group-level processes that erode trust between community members (e.g., suspicions regarding the presence of infiltrators or provocateurs), weaken norms of solidarity and resistance (e.g., through polarization over the use of different resistance tactics), and thereby make it more difficult for groups to organize collection action (see Penić et al. 2024). For example, in a study of state repression imposed by Israeli military occupation in the West Bank, Palestine, Penić et al. (2024) operationalized structural repression as geographical proximity to visible physical markers of the Israeli occupation (e.g., checkpoints). They found that greater proximity to structural repression was associated with less community cohesion and lower community norms of solidarity, as well as a lower likelihood of engaging in resistance (Penić et al. 2024). Overall, this research highlights the potential of structural repression to undermine social cohesion and perceived group norms that would otherwise mobilize collective action (see also Völker and Flap 2001). In brief, repression's backlash or deterring effect at the group level is principally dependent on whether it can alter the social cohesiveness within the movement and the community. On the one hand, repression can lead to mobilization when it fosters social cohesiveness through norms of solidarity and support; on the other hand, it can demobilize through decreasing trust within the movement and the community.

## 3.3 | Repression Affecting Structural Level Antecedents of Collective Action

It may seem self-evident that repression alters the structural antecedents of collective action (e.g., shifts in political opportunity structures) since this is how repression is often defined (e.g., Davenport 2007). However, how it does so, under what conditions, and how this affects peoples' willingness to engage in collective action is underspecified in psychology. This omission reduces our ability to explain contextual differences in the psychology of collective action. Nonetheless, there is ample research on these questions in political science and the sociology of social movements (e.g., Tarrow 2011). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to integrate these findings into existing psychological

models, we outline in broad strokes the main ways in which repressive agents can shape the structural context and how such efforts shape collective action, and we provide reflections on potential linkages to group and individual levels of analysis.

Bou Zeineddine and Leach (2022) used work on socioecological systems and norms to theorize constraints on collective action at multiple levels stemming from, for instance, the type and degree of societal change occurring, a society's normative and legal characteristics, and the power distribution in the given society. Authorities can either opportunistically leverage or deliberately engineer these structural features to repress their opponents.

Three examples help illustrate how structural repression can demobilize collective action by shaping other structural-level factors. Bajpai and Kureshi (2022) show in case studies of India and Pakistan evidence of "democratic authoritarianism." Specifically, they find that a variety of stakeholders (e.g., executives, legislatures, judiciaries, non-state organizations) initiate and enact institutional and ideational capture (the process of exploiting institutions and ideologies originally meant to advance the public interest for private or partisan gain). They show that such capture is implemented through democratic frames and mechanisms, constraining civil liberties and political opposition covertly and subversively. For instance, in Pakistan, the military intervened in civilian politics and reshaped legal and institutional norms (e.g., imposing martial law, suspending democratic constitutions and institutions) to preserve power. They justified these actions as necessary for national security. Through such "legitimizing myths," elites can reduce both the legislative space for opposition and the potential for critical consciousness in the general populace by leveraging "democratic consent" to constrain political participation (see also Liu and Sibley 2009; Reicher and Hopkins 2001).

We must also consider how repression in one nation alters international relations and affects the degree and sophistication of repression in other nations. For example, Olar (2019) finds evidence of diffusion of repression across repressive regimes, with repressive states looking to institutional and experiential peers to enhance and refine their repressive techniques, as well as to calibrate the severity of their repressive actions to approximate those of others. This indicates a set of global norms that condition how and how much states repress, through (elite) group-level modeling and social learning.

Furthermore, repression can shape and leverage contextual conditions beyond the political or security spheres. For example, Stalin's "terror by hunger" campaign affected the economic, and material realm through an agricultural policy against Ukrainians to exterminate them by starvation (e.g., seizing grains, imposing blockades, preventing food aid), as well as subjugate the remainder through subsistence dependency to survive (Rozenas and Zhukov 2019), thereby making it impossible for the opposition to mobilize dissent.

In sum, there are many examples illustrating how repression can be enacted through individuals and groups shaping international, ecological, cultural, political, economic, and social conditions at the structural level, and how these conditions, in turn, shape collective action or alter its group and individual-level antecedents. The absence of such dynamics in current social psychological models is a major weakness that needs to be addressed.

## 4 | Synthesis

One clear conclusion from the current review is whether repression quells or ignites further collective action is shaped by multiple factors on the individual, group, and structural level and their interactions. Our review suggests at least three sets of factors that may tilt the scale in one direction (i.e., demobilizing effect) or the other (i.e., mobilizing backlash effect of repression): (1) characteristics of repression, (2) characteristics of the social movement as well as activists as individuals, and (3) broader historical and socio-political conditions of the given context. We discuss these three clusters in the following sections.

### 4.1 | Characteristics of Repression: The Velvet Glove Versus the Iron Fist

While the present review distinguished between repression occurring at three levels of analysis (structural, group, individual), repression can also be characterized along other dimensions (see Earl et al. 2022). For example, repression may be more distal, preemptive, and subtle; this can involve, for instance, a gradual or covert closing of political opportunity structures (Tarrow 1996), the imposition of systematic barriers to the emergence of dissenting networks (Davenport 2007; Opp 2009), rhetorical cooptation by elites (e.g., adopting a movement's language or ideas without actually believing in or supporting them; Haugaard 2010; Rucht 1990; Snow and Benford 1988), and identity leveraging (Gurr 1993; Posner 2005). Such forms of repression are often demobilize collective action, as these tactics can reduce perceived grievances and increase system-justifying ideologies. Conversely, repression can be more proximal, reactive, and visible, involving risks or costs associated with dissent, including legal costs (e.g., arrests and detentions), financial costs (e.g., fines or career losses), and physical costs (e.g., injuries or killings; see Ayanian et al. 2021). Interestingly, due to their visible risks and costs that can be reframed as grievances, such forms of repression have more often been linked to a higher willingness to engage in high-risk collective action (see Ayanian et al. 2021).

### 4.2 | Characteristics of Social Movements: Unity and Consensus Versus Fragmentation and Dissension

Our review also suggests several factors related to social movements that may influence whether repression mobilizes or demobilizes collective action. For instance, social movements with a strong and resilient identity (Castells 2012; Nepstad 2011; Polletta and Jasper 2001), high social cohesion and solidarity norms (Gamson 1992; Snow and Soule 2010), and members that are close-knit (Goodwin 2001), and movements characterized by high ideological affinity (including the agreement on how to respond to state repression or adherence to strong party line), may be more able to counter repression with further mobilization. By contrast, social movements with a weaker identity that are more prone to distrust and internal divisions, and whose members

have substantial ideological differences, may be more likely to experience the demobilizing effect of repression. We note, however, that our list is not exhaustive and merely points to some examples. For instance, a movement's values and norms, including religious ones or belief in the movement's cause, can shape the importance given to or the meaning ascribed to the risks and costs of repression (C. Smith 1991). For instance, in the context of the Palestinian Intifada, the religious and nationalistic framing shaped how individuals perceived Israeli repression and helped them endure the violence and continue their resistance (Hammami 1999, 2005).

### 4.3 | Characteristics of the Sociopolitical Context: History and Organization in Movements and Governance

Key contextual factors that may determine whether repression dampens or fuels protest, according to our review, are the history of the country's democratic functioning and history and existing networks of dissent (see Adra and Li 2024). This suggests a cumulative nature of collective action; although research tends to center on one social movement or even a particular protest, dissent is facilitated by prior resistance, and conversely impeded by long-lasting silence and deference to the authorities (see also Saab et al. 2024).

## 5 | Recommendations

The social psychological literature reviewed here highlights the centrality of individual-level appraisals in shaping whether these context factors demobilize or mobilize collective action (Adra and Li 2024; Ayanian et al. 2024). In other words, while repression constitutes a material reality, its influences are largely mediated by people's perceptions and emotions. Based on this insight, we derive some practical recommendations for organizers and activists looking to overcome rather than be demobilized by repression. We subsequently address the authorities themselves and propose productive ways to approach the question of dissent and repression, noting that these recommendations are relatively abstract and epistemically and politically challenging. We close with recommendations for social science researchers who investigate collective action dynamics in repressive contexts. We note that all of these recommendations should be approached cautiously, due to the complex and highly variable, situated, and ideological nature of each political context.

### 5.1 | Recommendations for Organizers and Movement Leaders

Saab et al. (2024) presented a social psychological framework to understand repression and counter-repression based on the 2019 Lebanese uprising. They argue that repression undermines the social psychological capital of collective action, by weakening social psychological drivers of collective action (e.g., perceived injustice and politicized identification) and activating social psychological deterrents (e.g., fear). Accordingly, effective counter-repression maintains or restores the eroded social psychological capital of collective action. This can be achieved through political discourse but also activities (e.g. network-building, alliance-building, building support structures). We cannot get into all the activities that may help counter-repression, but we provide a few examples of those that can affect the social psychological capital of collective action.

For instance, given the findings on the role of grievances in mobilizing collective action, a recommendation for organizers and social movements is to create and disseminate their own narratives and frames that delegitimize the repressive authorities and legitimize the movement and to counter censorship with the creation of alternative informational sources that document and highlight all manifestations of state repression, as to maintain a heightened sense of grievance. Activists in Germany, for example, have launched initiatives archiving the repression of the Palestine solidarity movement in the country that is not often reported in mainstream media, with the goal of "ensuring that these injustices will not be forgotten" (Archive of Silence 2023).

Additionally, in light of the research on the role of different forms of efficacy in mobilizing collective action under repressive conditions (e.g., Ayanian et al. 2021), it may be useful for organizers to communicate some of the shorter term and more feasible movement aims beyond the obvious but longer term social change goals that are harder to achieve. This can include aims such as empowering the people through mass gatherings of like-minded people and empowering chants and speeches at protests, building momentum and growing the movement, and undermining the authorities however possible (see also Gülsüm Acar et al. 2024). Moreover, movement organizers should also engage in activities, rather than just discourse, to enhance efficacy. This can include celebrating wins and progress achieved in advancing the movement's goals and undermining the opponent.

Research also underscores the importance of emotional processes in (de-)mobilization under repression. Organizers may benefit from evaluating the emotional cultures of their social movement (e.g., Goodwin and Jasper 2004; Sitrin and Azzellini 2014; Wood 2001) as well as the broader emotional cultures, considering cultural differences in emotions. For instance, in cultures where dignity and pride are highly valued, organizers can capitalize on frames of "threats to dignity or pride" or "restoring dignity" in response to repression to further mobilize participation in collective action (Bayat 2013). Organizers may also consistently emphasize action-inducing emotions (e.g., anger, outrage) as opposed to debilitating ones (e.g., fear). For instance, group leaders can act as "entrepreneurs of emotion" (Reicher et al. 2010) by crafting compelling narratives that highlight injustice, assign blame, and emphasize collective strength. These narratives help to increase emotions like anger that drive action while reducing feelings of fear that might hold people back. Additionally, symbolic actions such as wearing specific clothing or participating in group rituals can strengthen commitment to the group's goals by fostering a shared emotional experience (Goldenberg et al. 2016). They can also engage in practical steps, such as compiling resources on how to counter physical repression like tear gas (e.g., "Lebanon: Protect protesters" 2019) or providing systematic support for those who may be arrested (e.g., Brennan 2019) to decrease feelings of fear. It may also involve rhetorical tools that reaffirm the strength of the movement, its values and norms of supporting each other when in need, and

its ability to protect individual participants from the repressive authorities.

It also seems necessary for activists to actively and creatively protect their movements from repressive identity fractions. In the case of the 2019 Lebanese uprising, for instance, when the authorities attempted to divide the movement by claiming some organizers were funded by Western interest groups, activists responded by putting up videos with the tag "I am the funder of the revolution," such as movement members could take photos and upload them to discredit the false allegations and restore a sense of unity (Beirut Observer 2019). A related example showcasing how movement organizers protected repressive identity-based divisions is within the African National Congress of the South African anti-apartheid struggle. The movement's leaders actively framed the movement as uniting racial, ethnic, and class groups and adopting the "Rainbow Nation," which promoted solidarity and inclusivity among the various oppressed groups. They also fostered open dialogue among these various groups, which helped the movement stay cohesive (Mandela 1995).

Movement leaders can also engage in tactics targeting elites to undermine cohesion in the ruling class; essentially inverting the divide-and-rule strategy typically used by repressive and oppressive regimes, directing relational and psychological influence bottom-up toward the powerful to serve a movement's cause rather than top-down to obstruct or eliminate it. Movements can employ divide-and-rule strategies just as regimes do, to create divisions within the elites and ruling classes (McClennen et al. 2022). For example, movement leaders can recognize and leverage changes in political circumstances in ways that turn repressive norms and policies (e.g., decentralized state-sponsored terror) into a liability and weakness in the regime. Two ways to do this are to either undermine such norms or to make their enforcement psychologically difficult for power structures (e.g., law enforcement). This causes disagreements, divisions, and schisms within enforcement agencies, which then spread to the ruling elite creating schisms. An example of this is how women-led protests in Iran used paternalistic and sexist norms to their advantage. During the height of the Women, Life, Freedom (WLF) movement, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and other law enforcement agencies faced internal conflict over how to deal with such women-lead protests; torn between upholding the regime's policies and dealing with the public perception of cracking down on women. This tactic allowed the WLF to undermine the authorities and cause internal divisions (Alemzadeh 2023).

Movements should also actively target ruling elites for cooptation or defection as well under specific political conditions. Del Rio (2022) showed evidence from the political careers of thousands of politicians in 12 electoral autocracies that regime elites defect opportunistically, to capitalize politically on grievances among other regime elites and the public. However, they showed that such defections are more likely when opposition movements and voting blocs are willing to cooperate and platform defecting elites (e.g., when state control of mass media is weakened), and when the nature of the primary grievances makes the cause relatively universal (e.g., economic recession). Under such conditions, elite cooptation may be an efficient and effective method of instantiating change from the grassroots. Movement leaders, on the other hand, should protect their movements from cooptation by elites and further legitimize their cause to the public at large by establishing mutually strategic but autonomous relationships with interested elite factions (Holdo 2019). For instance, the strategic alliances would push for reform but avoid premature compromises by the movement or being absorbed into the status quo. This prevents cooptation only if such cooperation is conditional on each side's recognition of the other's interests and autonomy and restricted to areas of mutual benefit, as was the case between the U.S. Civil Rights Movement and the Lyndon Johnson administration (Holdo 2019).

However, in cases where there are no clear mutual benefits to form strategic alliances, movement leaders can use decisional binds against the ruling or dominant elites, employing what McClennen et al. (2022) term "dilemma actions." Movement leaders design such actions strategically to force lose-lose decisions on their opponents. An illustrative example is the "Kisses in the Subway" action that Turkish activists undertook in Ankara, where authorities banned public displays of affection (see McClennen et al. 2022). By flooding the subway with activists offering greeting kisses to all, action leaders forced the authorities to either enforce their ban by arresting people for kissing (an absurd position for a traditional mode of greeting) or allow their authority to be flouted. Both courses of action forced a loss of legitimacy on authorities and further strengthened the movement's cause.

There are other ways relational and psychological influence can be used to change cohesion and solidarity dynamics in movement's favor. Just as the literature highlights that repressive regimes look to their peers (i.e., other repressive states) to stock their repressive toolkits (Olar 2019), activists and organizers can benefit immensely from other movements' experiences in counter-repression. For example, during the Ferguson protests in the United States., Palestinian activists recorded and shared videos with tips on how to deal with tear gas in solidarity with the protestors, sharing their own learned experience and further strengthening historical connections between the two liberation-oriented movements (Bailey 2015). The documentation of repression and counter-repression dynamics in any given social movement can therefore, in addition to empowering the movement itself, also empower those fighting for causes far beyond its geographic boundaries (see, e.g., resources from the International Center for Nonviolent Conflict 2024). But the keys to this empowering cooperation are participants' relational and psychological motivations for solidarity and cohesion across intergroup boundaries through empathy or the recognition of shared suffering or goals beyond the differences in the specific causes across movements (for an overview, see Leach and Bou Zeineddine 2021).

We note that the crystallization of protective factors that can shield a social movement from repression or allow it to subvert repressive structures and tactics for counter-mobilization—such as the nurturance of movement social psychological capital, intermovement solidarity, or elite cooptation—often begins in the absence of visible collective action, during phases of "relative calm" but could prove decisive while protests are unfolding. Activists and organizers are therefore encouraged to consider the social psychological capital of the movements they are

embedded in, their relations to leading and dominant elites, and other contexts of successful dissent they may learn from, whether or not these movements currently involve large-scale protests.

Finally, social movements should plan or encourage different forms of resistance, at the individual and group level, that they can engage in (see Bou Zeineddine and Vollhardt 2024; Sharp 1993) and consider how different factions within movements taking on different tactics simultaneously can be useful for movement cohesion and efficacy (e.g., Ünal and Coskan 2024). It is vital to move beyond the prototype of overt and peaceful collective action and consider a broader range of resistance tactics that people use, especially under repressive conditions where open assembly comes at considerable risk (Vollhardt et al. 2020). For example, people engage in many other kinds of collective action to counter repression and violence—from prefigurative politics on a smaller scale (e.g., Acar, Ulug et al. 2024) and digital resistance (Uyheng et al. 2024) to armed underground resistance (Vollhardt and Bilewicz 2024) and revolutions (S. Moss and Elgizouli 2024). Much of the collective action under these conditions has to be, at least to some extent or for a certain period, covert or at least not recognizable to outside observers (Johannson and Vinthagen 2020; Scott 1985). Resistance strategies in such "tight spaces of oppression" (Rosales and Langhout 2020) also include everyday, mundane forms of resistance that are not organized and can occur individually (though following certain patterns within groups) and psychological forms of resistance. An interesting example of the latter, manifesting resilience and resistance in the face of the harshest repression, is *Sumud*. *Sumud* is a collective perseverance or /steadfastness in the face of oppression, typically observed in Palestine but also found in many other oppressive contexts (Albzour 2024; Hammad and Tribe 2021; Makkawi 2015). These different forms of resistance can coincide with, feed into, or precede more overt and prototypical forms of collective action such as protest, and are therefore not mutually exclusive (Orazani and Teymoori 2024). Hence, one should not assume people are passive and not resisting when they are not on the streets; such knowledge, consideration, and practice of other forms of resistance can bolster efficacy beliefs, and consequently, further mobilization.

### 5.2 | Recommendation for Policymakers

As we reflect on policy recommendations, it is essential to clarify our positionality. Most of the empirical research we reviewed pertains to the repression of progressive social movements. Given our focus on the liberation of oppressed groups in contexts where regimes and elites are not open to change or are actively antagonistic to liberationist goals in the first place, we center liberationist social movements in our analysis. As such, most of our recommendations are for activists and movement leaders, to enhance their capacity to mobilize and counter repression more effectively, in order to advance a liberatory agenda. However, we do have some recommendations for authorities.

We caution power holders, based on our review of empirical findings, that repression often has backlash effects, and its efficacy and outcomes are not predictable, much less guaranteed. Moreover, while the reviewed literature also suggests that repression is sometimes effective in demobilizing overt collective action, other bodies of work that are beyond the scope of this review but that we briefly alluded to show that when overt collective action is repressed, other forms of resistance emerge and form the seeds from which more violent or radical resistance can eventually grow (Vollhardt 2013). Thus, repression of resistance may be even less effective than the present review suggests in the long run and may instead radicalize and destabilize societies.

Instead, we find that collective action research invites us to rethink existing power structures and societal arrangements more broadly. In the interest of stable, flourishing societies, recommendations to policymakers are that social movements must draw our attention to the underlying grievances and to how structural inequalities, lack of accountability and transparency, disproportionate use of force, and lack of voice that may drive collective action and instability (see also, Medina 2023). How we recommend that our systems be rethought is, of course, informed by our ideological positionings on what societal arrangements are most just. Simultaneously, however, this is backed by much research reviewed here, documenting the backlash effects of repression, and other work beyond the scope of this review that demonstrates radicalizing and antidemocratic potentials of repression of nonviolent collective action (e.g., Ellefsen 2021). Accordingly, our main recommendation for policymakers– is to find ways to obviate the need for oppositional contestation and the dominative structures that bring about dynamics of repression and resistance in the first place.

One way to achieve this is to safeguard pluralist, democratic, egalitarian, and/or liberatory norms and policies against subtle erosions, as these norms reduce the need for authorities to use preemptive or subtle repression or consequently more reactive and visible repression. Guarding these norms, or whichever combination of them that enhance individual and collective self-determination and empowerment in the cultural-political context at hand, would protect governments from losing their moral authority and legitimacy, sliding into authoritarianism, and from cycles of oppression and retaliation that destabilize. In this way, governments can best ensure stable societies over the long term.

More actively, authorities are advised to employ more participative, deliberative, liberatory, and community-based approaches to governance that recognize and address needs at hierarchical disadvantage or societal margins. One general direction for policy towards this grand aim is enhancing transparency, scrutiny, and accountability for the powerful, together with the diffusion of power. By revisiting the implementation of concepts and systems of sovereignty and democracy and experimenting with systems of governance that have more inclusive, deliberative, and participative features that respect the voices of the marginalized and disadvantaged in decision-making, collective action can be enhanced and built into political systems by design, rather than coped with by authorities through appeasement, cooptation, or repression (e.g., the tree of participation, Bell and Reed 2022; see also, Bou Zeineddine and Pratto 2017; Bou Zeineddine and Vollhardt 2024; Prilleltensky 2008, 2020).

Ostrom (1990) identified decades ago the main principles required for sustaining self-organized complex socioecological systems (of which political systems are only one example).

This work continues to be refined but has consistently shown that while all broken systems are broken in different ways, all sustainable systems work for similar reasons (McGinnis and Ostrom 2012; Ostrom 1990). She and others have shown that polycentric governance, emphasizing locality, autonomy, and diversity in action agency, making use of diverse and layered institutions of different kinds and degrees of formality, is more sustainable, prosperous, inclusive, and future-oriented—and less subject to conflict and collapse than centralized hierarchies (Aligica and Tarko 2012; McGinnis and Ostrom 2012). Such an approach necessitates placing communities' rights at the center of governance and adopting the principle that every system should operate at the most local level consistent with its function, and do so in the most participative way possible. While we advocate that policymakers heed the voices of social movements for more sustainable and participatory governance, we must also acknowledge the paradox within this suggestion. Historically, power is rarely ceded voluntarily; instead, it is often secured through collective action and persistent mobilization. Recommending that policymakers relinquish or redistribute power based on appeals to fairness and sustainability assumes a level of enlightened self-interest that our field—and indeed, lived experience—shows is uncommon. Without the pressure of organized action, rights, and demands are seldom met. We, therefore, find it important to highlight that such change will require strong movements and coalitions of movements to break elite consensus on fundamental aspects of political and socioeconomic systems, and likely require allyship between such movements and sympathetic elites as well.

In a nutshell, collective action research, as does much scientific analysis of sociopolitical and economic systems, ultimately demands the dismantling of local, regional, and international systems of oppression, domination, and repression. This means that authorities must halt excessive force, unlawful detentions, surveillance, and harassment of movements, dramatically and meaningfully expand participation, transparency, and accountability in governance and enforcement, create community models that build trust, decriminalize peaceful protest, civil disobedience, and ensure the right to free speech and assembly.

### 5.3 | Recommendations for Theory and Future Research

First, the review shows that research on repression and collective action needs to focus more on how social and structural factors impact individuals and groups. This means recognizing and analyzing the complex systems in which these behaviors occur, such as the relationships between people, organizations, and the environment. By doing so, research can connect different levels of analysis, from individual actions to broader social patterns, and better understand how these dynamics work together (e.g., Bou Zeineddine and Leach 2022; McGinnis and Ostrom 2012; Power and Velez 2020). Relevant multilevel theoretical frameworks in psychology, like the social identity theory-based frameworks and models discussed in this review, have seen much more work at the individual level than at the group and structural levels—this needs to be remedied. For instance, particular to emotions, while we know emotions exist at multiple levels of analysis (e.g., Menges and Kilduff 2015), we are unaware of studies examining the link between emotion at the group or structural level and collective action under repression. Concepts such as collective emotional regulation, emotional synchrony, emotional climate, and emotional (regulation) norms may be fruitful to explore moving forward (Bou Zeineddine and Leach 2022; Goldenberg et al. 2016). Additionally, research should historicize repressed social movements and consider various factors (e.g., different levels of repression, efficacy beliefs, movement's identity, emotional climate) in a longer timeline, and account for feedback loops, tipping points, and other nonlinear dynamics involved in these processes. As several examples in our review also show, it is important that we also consider (intersectionalities in) power, needs, and vulnerabilities in future research and policy recommendations on collective action under repression (e.g., Bou Zeineddine and Pratto 2017; Prilleltensky 2008, 2020).

Second, we need to integrate collective action models with research on elite psychology and behavior and their impacts on repressive processes and collective action at all levels of analysis. This includes studying how powerful elites act collectively and influence government decisions (Abbink and Salverda 2012). For instance, when policies aim to empower elite groups like the judiciary or civil society without critical thought, they can fail or even backfire, potentially worsening repression (Bajpai and Kureshi 2022; Massoumi 2021).

Additionally, future research in social psychology should examine more closely the different resistance actions, rather than just collective action, that individuals decide to engage in, and should continue to refine at multiple levels predictive and explanatory models of when and why people shift resistance tactics, intragroup variations in preferences for different tactics, and how the types and dimensions of repression may shape which resistance tactics people choose (e.g., Thomas et al. 2022).

Importantly, examining political repression at the organizational level (e.g., workplace), which links to economic repression as well as trade unionism, is another avenue for future research. Unions are manifestations of social movements that the social psychology of collective action rarely examines, for example. Another related recommendation is to turn our gaze inwards to our own academic institutions and associations, examining repression within our own workplaces as academics, and how our academic and political freedom are constrained by our larger systems. This organizational repression is apparent, for example, with regard to repression of academics and students who show solidarity with Palestine.

Finally, in the spirit of reflexivity, we also observe that although we have tried to offer a social psychological picture of collective action in repressive contexts using multilevel thinking and borrowing from other disciplines, our team is still composed of scholars who are mainly trained as social psychologists. We need to rethink our modes of (research) operation and decisions for collaborations. If we are to produce a richer and deeper multilevel integration, we must work in more interdisciplinary teams. This necessitates that our journal outlets encourage and require such interdisciplinarity as well. Our knowledge production centers must also recognize the challenges this may involve and provide the necessary resources and support to facilitate such collaborations.

## 6 | Conclusion

What is clear is that regardless of how extreme the oppressive conditions, humans resist, and have psychological and social tools that permit them to successfully withstand enforced ways of being and knowing, and to counter the effects of repression of such resistance. Humans resist (e.g., openly or covertly, peacefully or violently), cope, and make meaning out of these experiences and the experiences of oppression and repression, and these processes are commonly overlapping. Quite often, the meaning we make is based on resistance, in frustrating the oppressor's desire to erase or oppress entirely, and this objectively and subjectively ties the concepts of resilience and resistance together in collective action (Bou Zeineddine and Vollhardt 2024). Hence, repression is more often than not likely to fail in its goals of deterrence and suppression, especially over longer timespans. Whether or not it works is beside the point, however, for those concerned about the public or the common good. Even if repression can sometimes be effective at suppressing overt manifestations of discontent, preventing changes to status quo conditions, or avoiding instability, it can also limit society's ability to adapt to change, reduce opportunities for societal innovations, and create contextual effects that harm everyone while increasing injustices and inequalities between people—ultimately backfiring if the goals are order and stability (see also Rodríguez-Bailón et al. 2020). Converging research across the social sciences advises authorities to embrace more sustainable and just political systems that involve deliberative, pluralist, participatory, representative, and/or liberatory visions of society and the world. Our review also underlines how researchers need to adopt more integrative, multilevel, and global approaches that acknowledge the complexity of collective action as people experience and resist repression so that we can contribute more effectively and meaningfully to the betterment of a complex world facing multiple intersecting crises and challenges.


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### Endnotes

[1]There is much to be said about the shortcomings of "objective" indices that categorize countries into repressive vs. non-repressive (or even along a continuum of repression), both in terms of their conceptual weaknesses, and in terms of their historical and present weaponization in the service of the (international) powers that be. While this is beyond the scope of the current review, scholars have long written critically about the limitations and even harm of these indices (e.g., Herman & Chomsky 1988).

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