

The Scope for Dialogue with Security Forces in Hybrid Regimes

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This discussion paper draws upon in-depth IFIT research, interviews, and convenings with leading experts on the role of security forces in hybrid regimes. The paper will be the subject of a forthcoming, expanded research and consultation process, with a view to providing more detailed guidance to policymakers and practitioners.

Introduction

Despite divergence across contexts, hybrid regimes (also known as competitive-authoritarian regimes) are generally defined as governments that combine democratic and authoritarian traits. One key aspect of this hybridity is the working relationship established between the ruling party leadership and the security forces of the country (e.g., military or paramilitary forces, police, intelligence services). When the former faces civic uprisings or resistance (e.g., in response to a fraudulent electoral result), repression of some sort by the latter can become necessary for regime continuity.

A general pattern can be observed in hybrid regimes: ruling parties that are successful in perpetuating their grip on power (and vice versa for those that have not) are predominantly those that develop and maintain the loyalty of key branches or factions of the security forces. Unless the democratic actors in a country have a realistic understanding of that relationship, they will struggle to see democracy restored, whether through the ballot box or through political negotiation.

In the face of this challenge, this discussion paper offers analysis of 1) the typical sources of resilience of hybrid regimes, 2) the mechanisms used by ruling parties to gain control or secure the loyalty of security forces, and 3) how civic and democratic forces can overcome common dilemmas when attempting to engage security sector actors in such contexts. Other issues – such as how hybrid regimes can be prevented from emerging, or the means by which ruling parties co-opt other institutions – are not examined here.

Also, while it is understood that there are hybrid regimes in which the ruling party is not the dominant player in the relationship (e.g., places such as Pakistan where security forces play the dominant role, or such as Egypt where there is more of a fusion between them), much of the analysis of this paper is nevertheless applicable.

Sources of Resilience of Hybrid Regimes

Hybrid regimes are flexible by definition and design. They can quickly transform from what appears to be a democratic phase with competitive elections and some political openness, to a phase that is more politically restrictive and repressive – and then back again. Indeed, it is precisely this plasticity that undergirds hybrid regimes, allowing them to pivot away from or toward coercion as and when needed to retain power.

Co-optation of key institutions (e.g., courts, media) and the use of legal mechanisms to fracture opposition parties are common strategies deployed to influence elections and remain in power without the need to resort to coercion (e.g., [Kenya under president Moi](#)). But they are not enough. To endure, a ruling party in a hybrid regime must also achieve wide-reaching institutional control of the security forces. This ensures that civic uprisings can be repressed (e.g., [Bahrain 2011 and Iran 2009](#)) and electoral frauds can be enforced (e.g., [Belarus 2021](#)). By contrast, without such control, the security forces can become a constant threat to repel or boycott the ruling party's efforts to dismantle checks and balances or overturn electoral results.

Yet, the degree to which a ruling party in a hybrid regime can successfully alternate between authoritarian, semi-authoritarian, or democratic traits and tactics depends significantly upon *the degree to which security forces are politically co-opted in reality, but institutionally independent in appearance*. This process is usually gradual rather than sudden, and is never fully complete, as factions within the security forces may resist the attempt or seek pre-emptively to overthrow the ruling party and govern on an interim basis until new elections can take place (e.g., [Mali 2012 and 2021](#)). External factors such as civic uprisings, corruption scandals, and economic instability (which may affect the legitimacy of the ruling party) may provide opportunities for security forces to take on a more dominant role (e.g., [Algeria in the years after the 1988 riots](#)).

FIGURE 1: PLASTICITY OF HYBRID REGIMES



Ruling parties, however, can deploy a wide variety of strategies and incentives to thwart such resistance, (re)gain control, and achieve effective coup-proofing. When they are successful, the country's security forces can end up with *the continuity of the ruling party* as their highest institutional objective, willing to use harsh coercion against democratic and civic forces when required. In such circumstances, the security forces cease to be autonomous, becoming instead the ruling party's insurance policy when its dominion comes under threat.

Loyalty Mechanisms

Depending on the local political context, ruling parties in hybrid regimes gain control or secure the loyalty of security forces through a combination of different strategies. The following are among the most prominent:

- a) **Institutional co-optation.** A common practice in hybrid regimes is to ease or even eliminate constitutional rules and legal procedures that guarantee parliamentary or congressional control over security forces, instead concentrating decision making on security issues in the hands of the executive (e.g., [Iraq's Republican Guard](#)). Such changes, which may be concentrated in the hands of a few high-ranking members of the ruling party, involve the security forces (or a sufficiently strong faction within them) shifting from defenders of the constitution to defenders of the ruling party, and thus from a corporatist logic to a politicised reality. To ensure loyalty in such a system, active policies of indoctrination are necessary at all ranks.
- b) **Coercion and surveillance.** Ruling parties in stable hybrid regimes implement coup-proofing strategies that complicate coordination, weaken unity, increase surveillance, and impede communication channels that the military or other security forces could potentially use to threaten or overthrow the ruling party. Practices include subdividing security institutions into multiple parts; breaking up inherited decision-making structures; creating paramilitary groups that are loyal to the ruling party leadership; expanding counterintelligence capacity and monitoring; and punishing and purging dissident factions within security agencies (e.g., [Mobutu's Zaire](#)).
- c) **Access to political power.** The ruling party in an effective hybrid regime will often allow senior members of the security forces to have a formal role in government, granting them ministerial, gubernatorial, or managerial positions from which they can influence the policy-making process and determine the allocation of budgets, personnel, and patronage. When the ruling party needs to enter into a more repressive mode, it can, if necessary, increase the allocation of key political posts to security forces. The key is to retain the minimal veneer of a civilian government, despite the presence of openly held governance roles by members of the security forces.
- d) **Incentives and economic rents.** Along with political appointments, hybrid regimes commonly expand the number and type of internal promotions, salary increases, and prestigious titles given to key members of the security forces (e.g., reflected in disproportionate numbers of generals). Similarly, hybrid regimes often allow

security forces the control of certain revenue-generating industries – both legal and illegal – ranging from banking, construction, and food distribution (e.g., [Pakistan](#)) to drug trafficking and seats on corporate boards of directors. A wide range of social and economic benefits also tends to be extended to family members, as a further commitment mechanism. All of these economic incentives strongly encourage important leaders and factions in the security forces to remain loyal to the ruling party, investing them in its survival.

- e) **External alliances and cooperation.** Ruling parties in stable hybrid regimes make sure to build alliances with their equals in other countries, thus shortening the learning curve for successful coup-proofing and fostering cross-regime solidarity in the face of criticism of their democratic or human rights credentials. The international cooperation and advice can encompass all the areas mentioned in this paper, but easily widen to include the training of special security agencies (e.g., [Iraqi-trained Yemeni Republican Guard](#)) and the acquisition of technology for the monitoring and repression of opposition groups (e.g., Ethiopian security services' reliance on [Chinese technology](#)). International cooperation among hybrid regimes is so strong in some cases that it creates the impression of a common playbook across countries and regions.

Naturally, the sequence and speed at which loyalty-building mechanisms can be implemented varies by context. But all else being equal, things move faster when a large majority of members in the security forces and ruling party have authentic feelings of shared identity, ideology, and political origins or originate from the same region, ethnic group, or sect (e.g., [Syria under al-Assad rule](#)). Combined with the mechanisms described above, these can fuel a narrative situating them within a shared mission to defend against enemy “others” – including former colleagues who rejected the co-optation process or were purged. This narrative can be reinforced by the ruling party's deliberate use of rhetoric that reinforces social and political divides.

Engagement Strategies and Recommendations

Civic and democratic forces active in the context of hybrid regimes and interested in constructive dialogue with security forces face enormous challenges. Below are some of the issues that require attention.

- a) **Empirical analysis.** Democratic and opposition forces often have a limited understanding of the security forces in their own country, especially in regard to the co-optation mechanisms and dynamics examined above. They may also fail to understand which internal divisions exist and how to leverage them for constructive engagement and dialogue. Common errors include 1) underestimating the security forces' willingness to repress, 2) overestimating their willingness to negotiate, and 3) misunderstanding how a crisis for the ruling party amounts to a problem for the security forces in the same measure. When it comes to the military, there is an added tendency to misunderstand its place in the larger system of national security forces (both official and unofficial). An empirical mapping of this whole

picture is crucial to identifying both potential allies as well as potential obstacles to constructive relationships.

- b) **Clear and realistic goals.** In stable hybrid regimes, security forces may play a more direct or indirect role in controlling political power. Regardless of their level of influence, they will typically prefer to minimise reputational risks that would affect the ostensibly democratic credentials of the regime as a whole, while allowing themselves the latitude to “neutrally” resolve governance or constitutional crises that may at some point threaten the survival of the regime. This means that they will often prefer to be indirect facilitators (or behind-the-scenes advocates) rather than direct decision-makers, in order to protect the mythos of their independence and impartiality while safeguarding important political perks and economic rents. The point is that security forces’ interests will tend toward ensuring the survival of the hybrid regime through internal and cosmetic adjustments – except when a country’s democratic and opposition forces have achieved decisive unity and leverage for negotiating or effectuating transition (e.g., [Sudan 2019](#)). As such, clear and realistic political demands (e.g., electoral reforms) over unrealistic ones (e.g., regime change) have a better probability of success in facilitating dialogue.
- c) **Risk avoidance.** In some hybrid contexts, political opposition parties may become desperate for change and opt to encourage internal coups, especially within the military (e.g., [Venezuela 2019](#)). Such strategies are highly implausible in stable hybrid regimes, in which the relationship and inter-dependence between ruling party members and security forces is too consolidated and coup-proofing controls (via intelligence agencies) too great. Even when internal revolts or insurrections occur, they are typically minor and lead to new purge cycles, improved internal controls, and greater distrust of the political opposition as a negotiation partner or future holder of the reins of government.
- d) **Engagement of middle ranks.** The politicisation of security forces in general, and the military specifically, tends to be most entrenched in the upper echelons in the context of hybrid regimes. By contrast, although there are cases of coups led by mid-ranking members of security forces, they are generally perceived as less politicised, as they often interpret politics differently from their commanders and may worry about the impact of the status quo on the institution’s legitimacy and on their own livelihoods. As such, provided that democratic and civic forces are careful in how they navigate the hierarchy, middle-ranking officers are often a good entry point for outreach. They frequently have access to high-level intelligence and may positively influence both the top brass and the rank and file.
- e) **The role of intermediaries.** When considering how to engage security sector actors in a hybrid regime context, a combination of different kinds of intermediaries can be ideal. Normally the effort should be led by local actors with a deep understanding of the history and political dynamics of the country and its security forces, and with established relationships with key targets. This may also involve engaging security sector actors with strong horizontal mobility (e.g., with access to key actors from different security structures). But likewise, early efforts can be facilitated by external intermediaries. Such forays should, however, take account

of security paradigms and powerbrokers in the region, including any tendency to privilege short-term security needs over long-term democratisation goals (e.g., South Africa's critical role but cautious approach to political negotiations in SADC).

- f) **Strategic readiness and messaging.** Windows of opportunity for dialogue and transition tend to open unexpectedly (e.g., civic uprisings, political assassinations, natural disasters) and to close quickly. As such, democratic and opposition forces require a minimum of technical readiness, political unity, and message coherence at all times. Their private and public proposals about the country must tangibly speak to the needs and desires of security forces, as well as their envisaged role in a scenario of democratic change. In this regard, opportunities to build upon proposals originally conceived within the security sector should be taken into account, as they can provide a helpful sense of ownership. Communications experts can play an important role in all of this, helping to increase the resonance of key messages.
- g) **Guarantees.** In stable hybrid regimes, any potential for dialogue or political negotiation must take account of the need for credible institutional and personal guarantees for security forces, so that they come to perceive change as more beneficial than continuity. Institutional guarantees might include the retention of key ministerial and operational roles, prerogatives, and economic perks, while personal guarantees might include conditional amnesties, sanctions relief, and security assurances – all of which may be bolstered by regional and international accompaniment and backing.

Conclusions

This paper has described some of the common challenges that complicate the possibilities for quality engagement and dialogue between democratic and security forces in hybrid regime contexts. These challenges limit the options for confidence building and political settlements that could usher in a democratic transition, and with it, a more institutionalised and apolitical role for the country's security forces. Although daunting, the challenges are not insurmountable. Hybrid regimes may be highly adaptable and durable, but they are not eternal.

Selected References

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