

Democratization



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Amir Barjasteh

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Policing repertoire of knowledge practices in neo-authoritarian governance: authority of sovereignty cluster of global norms, and the constitution of legitimizing narrative for suppression in Iran's "Woman, life, freedom" uprising

Amir Barjasteh 💿



ABSTRACT

How is the suppression of mass protests epistemically conducted in neo-authoritarian governance? Given that legal invocations alone are insufficient to legitimize the brutal suppression of a state's own citizens' protests, the article aims to identify the epistemic practices through which neo-authoritarian policing actors manipulate public perceptions of protest situations, thereby seeking to legitimize their suppression. The policing rhetoric of the Iran uprising "Woman, Life, Freedom" in 2022 is selected as an empirical case. The textual data is collected from two influential Iranian state-led news agencies, and analysed quantitatively by corpus linguistic methods and then qualitatively by discourse analysis as elaborated in Epistemic Governance analytic. As the findings revealed, the governing technology works through the strategic invocations of the authority of the "sovereignty cluster of global norms" in the constitution of a legitimizing narrative including four counterframes, which convert the protesting situation into a security context and bypass the internationally recognized "right to protest." The set of epistemic practices identified here signals the invention of a "neo-authoritarian policing repertoire of knowledge practices." Given the states' privileged position on sovereignty matters, the study warns against the repertoire as it constitutes a condition of epistemic closeness, effectively blocking democratization attempts.

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KEYWORDS Neo-authoritarianism; policing discourse; epistemic politics; discursive opportunity; sovereignty cluster of norms

Introduction

The rising neo-authoritarian movement has brought along unprecedented technologies for governance. In recent protest policing cases, neo-authoritarian actors have aspired to re-incorporate legitimation during the repression of dissents in order to keep their rule stable. They seek to construct legitimacy for suppression when

ruling with an iron fist.² But, given the consolidation of "the right to protest" in the international human rights regime³, neo-authoritarian governance for the repression of own citizens requires exceptional politics to counter the authority of those protesting rights. As emerging scholarship has highlighted, neo-authoritarian politics extends beyond typical "counter-framing" practices⁴ to justify repressive actions by influencing public opinion, and manipulating how people think and talk about contentious politics. This trend signals the transfer of domination relations from political fields to discursive fields of politics in modern government. That is to say, neo-authoritarian actors are involved in the construction of a cognitive framework - including a range of counter-frames - to intervene in the ways people make sense of the protest at hand. Moreover, once knowledge production practices have become a significant part of contemporary activism⁶, neo-authoritarian policing actors employ epistemic practices, which are defined as patterned actions of producing and manipulating social knowledge⁷, to undermine those activists' conducts. Such epistemic practices actively influence people's understanding⁸ of any given street politics in neo-authoritarian politics. Despite dangerous consequences, these epistemic politics are not yet well-investigated. The article hence questions the epistemic politics of repressive protest policing in neo-authoritarian contexts - how the suppression of dissents is epistemically conducted, what constitutes repressive acts, and how discursive justifications for repression are sought to become compelling and legitimate.

As studies identified, turning any social protest into a matter of security and hence depoliticization of contentious politics is the most prevalent discursive strategy in the neo-authoritarian policing apparatus. ⁹ This technique permits them not just to manipulate their target audiences' opinions¹⁰, but also to blur other audiences' perceptions of the ongoing collective action, thereby shielding their repressive acts from the pressure of global civil society. But still, the ways states of security are applied to street protests remain understudied. That is to say, even authoritarian actors still have to justify securitization and the following uses of extraordinary measures¹¹, particularly against own citizens protesting in the streets. This maintains, according to securitization literature, the construction of security issues; primarily, by constituting referent objects of security and then, by identifying something as existential threats to those constructed referent objects. 12 Further studies stated that all political systems securitize their "core values," considering them as major referents of security. 13 Moreover, as Dean 14 pointed out, neo-authoritarian actors have found techniques to model governmental interventions on imagined values and beliefs and manipulate them to benefit their agenda. So, in order to legitimize extraordinary repressive acts, neo-authoritarian actors can utilize epistemic practices not just to (counter)frame street politics but to manipulate values and constitute referent objects of securitization. The article aims to identify these epistemic politics, from a sociology of knowledge perspective.

To examine these epistemic practices, the 2022 repressive crackdown of the Iranian uprising called "Woman, Life, Freedom" offers an important case study. On 16 September 2022, the death in custody of Mahsa (Jina) Amini, who had been detained by the government's "guidance patrol" for allegedly "improper" wearing of her hijab (headscarf), sparked a nationwide uprising that continued the rest of the year. 15 Given the historical gender and ethnic discriminations embodied in the case of Mahsa (Jina) Amini, the intersectionality of everyday resistance in society peaked in the uprising. ¹⁶ However, the police apparatus applied a diverse range of incapacitation tactics. Furthermore, as protests continued, the authorities extensively fired live



ammunition, metal pellets and tear gas and subjected protesters to severe beatings. In particular, mass killings were reported in peripheral ethnic-minority regions. ¹⁷ As of 14 November 2022, human rights groups were investigating the reported deaths of 341 protestors, including 52 children. ¹⁸ The largely visual documentation of excessive use of violence by police forces necessitates political justifications, at least, for the target audience, which makes the case applicable to this study.

This article first presents an integrative theoretical framework for studying neoauthoritarian epistemic politics in legitimizing repressive strategies. Then, the data and method of analysis are introduced. The study's textual data includes all reports and news from two influential state-led news agencies. Also, the capacities of a unique model of discourse analysis for this research are described. The results section, structured into three subsections, presents the findings of the empirical analysis on the legitimization of repression in the "Woman, Life, Freedom" case. In the discussion, I draw empirical and theoretical conclusions from the results. Lastly, the conclusion summarizes the key points of the article and then presents recommendations and implications. The article can be informative for social movement and democratization scholars, human rights advocates, and other global civil society members working particularly in non-democratic contexts, as it uncovers neo-authoritarian governing technologies for repressing street politics and democratization and warns against their consequences.

Theoretical considerations

The article's theoretical framework integrates the literature on the recontextualization of social practices with the recent formulation of authority as epistemic capital. While securitization has been recognized as the main discursive strategy, this article shows that recontextualization works as the epistemic practice underlying securitization practices in neo-authoritarian governance. Moreover, it employs the concept of epistemic capital to investigate, on the one hand, the constitution of the referent objects in securitization practices, and on the other, the legitimization of their repressive agenda.

Recontextualization here is defined as the strategic moulding of situations and prior texts and their integration into another discourse. 19 Starting from the assumption of conceiving context as constitutive of meaning²⁰, recontextualization can be recognized as the prerequisite of further meaning-making and discursive practices. In this way, the study argues that authoritative knowledge is produced by policing actors to re-contextualize the social practice of protesting, that is to transform the contentious politics into a security discourse "together with the purposes, legitimations and evaluations of that practice".²¹

The study, also, draws on the recent theorization of authority as epistemic capital to address the ways recontextualization practices are constituted and legitimized. In a relational articulation, the concept of epistemic capital refers to various "sources of authority" that actors cite in their arguments as they believe their audiences would accept those as legitimate.²² This is evident when actors invoke, for instance, science or religious values in their claims to persuade the audience of the legitimacy of their arguments. This understanding is in line with Beetham's groundbreaking work on the social construction of legitimation arguing that legitimacy is subject to the consent of the governed, and it is mostly justified by reference to widely-shared beliefs.²³ Following this, existing policing scholarship argues that the legitimation of policing in each case ought to conform to law, normative standards, and people's values and expectations.²⁴ Therefore, claims are made by law-and-order advocates to persuade the intended audience that the actions police take to manage protests are justifiable.²⁵ Due to the illegality of repressing citizens during protests, governmental interventions in sources of authority are necessary for the neo-authoritarian policing apparatus. This can be exemplified by the weaponization of counter-terrorism claims to silence dissents in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.²⁶

From the critical viewpoint of epistemic capital, actors ground their claims on the sources of legitimacy to pursue their agenda. In particular, in the absence of legal claims, norms and social expectations are invoked through epistemic practices. As shown, while we cannot see legitimacy, we can indirectly detect it by tracing societal principled legitimation via language and pertinent normative concepts.²⁷ However, the norm construction literature has identified the "dual quality" of norms as both constitutive and constituted; and showed that while the former explains compliance with norms via the logic of appropriateness, the latter understands divergence in normative meaning through practices (meaning-in-use) via the logic of contestedness.²⁸ Further studies have shown that actors are likely to be involved in norm contestation, either through their application or validity strategies, to react to a "normative pressure" enacted by a global norm in the world polity.²⁹ These qualitative aspects of norms, if evoked by epistemic practices, can provide a discursive opportunity structure that can amplify actors' messages in the public sphere in terms of public visibility, resonance, and legitimacy.³⁰

The study bridges recontextualization theory with the concept of epistemic capital to analyse not only the methods of turning protesting contexts into security matters but also the practices of accumulating epistemic capital under policing justifications aimed at legitimizing a repressive agenda. More specifically, it examines how neo-authoritarian policing actors draw upon the authorities of alternative norms, values, and social expectations to recontextualize protesting situations and constitute a securitized discourse over the protests— at least as perceived by the target audience. In this way, the article reveals how neo-authoritarian actors produce manipulative knowledge seeking to legitimize repressive acts against uprisings.

Data and method

Data collection

To examine justificatory claims and rhetorics for suppression, the study investigates policing discourse during and after the repressive crackdowns of the 2022 Iranian uprising called "Woman, Life, Freedom." As the study prioritizes the issue and the questions over the case, a single instrumental case study is designed.³¹ By considering the naturalistic generalization principles of qualitative case study research³², the study intended to find legitimating patterns of protest suppression that can be related and/or extrapolated to other neo-authoritarian cases.

Rather than focusing on talks by the Iranian government's official actors, this study collects textual data from state-led news agencies to consider the whole propaganda apparatus. The study considers that the new media ecology does not simply report or represent diverse situations of contentions but does actively "enact" and "perform" them.³³ So, this data selection strategy recognizes mass media as an influential discursive field within which diverse sets of argumentative tools with various

artefacts are utilized by social actors to frame issues. In this regard, state-controlled media can promote authoritarian propaganda.³⁴ As a data sample, the textual data from four Iranian state-controlled news sources were collected, but a large number of repeated reports were found in the initial database. To avoid redundancy, then, two prioritized agencies including Mashregh News and Mehr News were eventually selected. Those are influential news agencies with undeniable ties, either direct or indirect, with the Iranian government. 35 Different state-controlled news agencies, of course, could also be analysed. But, in summarily reading a random selection of other agencies in the initial phase, no additional claim-making variations requiring the spread of the data set were found. Following the qualitative social research fundamental principle³⁶, the aim here was not to propose a statistically significant or allencompassing sample but rather to develop a broad categorization that captures the key variations in repressive justifications within the public sphere. Even though, the data still can pursue data triangulation goals and hence keep quality and rigour, since it is collected from separate sources, which are two news agencies.³⁷

Methodological framework

This study looks at epistemic politics employed by neo-authoritarian policing actors to uncover how they seek to transform the social practice of protests into a securitized context, frame the ongoing protest as a public threat and thus legitimize repressive acts. Following Van Leeuwen's argument that "discourses are transformations or recontextualizations of social practices" 38, the study applies discourse analysis. A discursive approach enables us to explore both the transformation of the protest into a security threat and the construction of frames and the production of meaning-inuse within this wider securitized context of social interactions. Given that "the decontextualized study of legitimation is not possible"39, the discursive contexts in which such claims and thereby frames are constructed should be scrutinized.

Here, to investigate rhetorical justifications of repressive acts, I employ discourse analysis as elaborated in Epistemic Governance (EG) analytic. 40 To track "the strategic action of discourse which operates at the level of persuasion"41, the EG analytic is a useful methodological toolkit for this study as it investigates politics from a viewpoint of knowledge production and rhetoric. 42 In accordance with the Foucauldian understanding that politics of knowledge is deeply entwined with power unbalances, the EG analytic suggests that political actors apply diverse sets of epistemic work seeking to direct peoples' perception of reality. In this regard, the purpose of social knowledge production is not simply to investigate a pre-existing state of affairs, but it is performative in the sense that it also changes the social reality it is describing.⁴³

In a more generalized articulation of those studies identifying core framing tasks in collective actions⁴⁴, the EG framework concludes that such epistemic governances – through (counter-)framing or alike - target to influence people's perceptions over three "objects of epistemic work" including (a) the diagnosis of the situation at hand and related problems, (b) the identification of actors (and addressees), as well as (c) the suggestion of necessary and/or appropriate acts and/or remedies. 45 In this sense, while the first object can address the (re-)contextualization practices shifting people's perception of protests towards security matters, the two others track how protestors are (counter-) framed by policing actors and then what is good and appropriate for the society within the constructed security context. Then, in line with the

"emplotment" effect of narratives in social movements 46, the EG analytic argues that knowledge productions in discursive fields of politics "weave a narrative that works on those three objects" 47 that may accommodate various (counter-)frames. The "strategic narrative" providing enough justifications for suppression is hugely promoted by neo-authoritarian actors in the public sphere. 48 In addition, the EG analytical framework employs the concept of epistemic capital, referring to the authoritative sources or entities that actors draw upon in their meaning-making practices to render their agendas acceptable and legitimate. In line with recent analytical toolkits that have highlighted the politics of moralization through normative invocations in the legitimation of contemporary governance⁴⁹, the EG analytical framework argues that (political) actors - by creatively invoking commonly accepted principles, scientific outcomes, norms, laws, and customs as "moral authority" - can legitimize their claims and make their (counter-)framings successful. This aspect enables us to track the invocations of widely accepted norms and standards as sources of legitimation in counterframing practices of policing actors for suppressions. Overall, the epistemic governance analytic is applied here to investigate, first, recontextualization practices through which a securitized perception from the protesting event was sought to be constructed. Then, it proceeds to examine how counter-frames, supported by the moral authority of norms and values, are integrated into a legitimizing narrative that justifies suppression in response to the "Woman, Life, Freedom" uprising.

Data analysis process

The data includes all news entries (including news reports, visual news, interviews, Opinions, etc.,) covered by those news agencies' websites related to the so-called "Woman, Life, Freedom" uprising from 16 September to the end of the year 2022. Although the uprising continuation in 2023, the study limits its timeframe to the end of 2022 as the intense phase of street protests lasted for the period, and thus this timeframe can fulfil the study's aims of investigating counter-framings of street politics. First, all data were extracted from the news agencies' websites by the keywords, which are equivalents to protest⁵¹, disturbance⁵², riot⁵³ and turbulence⁵⁴ in Persian. The data scraping generated 3198 entries from Mashregh News, and 4630 from Mehr News. The refinement of data excerpts was carried out as there were still many repeated and/or redundant keywords on some pages. This step decreased the number of excerpts to 2402 by Mashregh News, and 4138 by Mehr News. The corpus contains a total of c. 1.4 million words.

The study employs the abductive research strategy. As a method of theorization in interpretive social research, abduction is based on an educated guess about the likely explanation for an observation, which can be tested.⁵⁵ This strategy leads us to probe the natural language of legitimation.⁵⁶ The initial sample embraces a host of themes including the framing theme like *protestors, separatists, terrorists, foreign agents*, and *security defenders*, as well as normative concepts such as *the right to protest, national sovereignty*, and *territorial integrity*, besides legal terms namely *order, riot, disturbance* and *security*. The study then proceeds in a grounded fashion, going back and forth between data selection/collection and data analysis/interpretation to test the guess stemmed from observations. It is followed by quantitative word frequency analysis searching for the number of actors' claims and normative concepts in their talks to represent schematic evidence over the citation of norms in each claim (Table 1).



Table 1. The word frequency of	main	codes.
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		Mashregh News		Mehr News	
		Number of news items mentioning the word	Number of word frequency	Number of news items mentioning the word	Number of word frequency
Main themes	protest	388	417	370	398
	disturbance	1848	2540	3837	4185
	riot	383	496	592	826
	turbulence	1231	1474	1348	1740
Normative concepts constituting frames	separatism	746	765	785	1043
	terrorism	895	983	1112	1353
	security	2174	3190	3421	3851
	territorial integrity	132	223	239	348
	sovereignty	420	447	503	524
	intervention	431	632	672	791

To corroborate the quantitative method, a cluster of data including three 10-day periods were selected to be qualitatively analysed. These three periods consist of the beginning 10-day period of street protests, a 10-day period in the middle (26.10 to 04.11), and the last 10 days. Given the importance of anti-terrorist claims in countering the protests, the second period was adjusted to the time of the only terrorist attack during the whole of 2022 in Iran to detect any shifts in actors' claims over the uprising at the time of this non-discursive event. Throughout the whole timeframe, there was a terrorist attack that occurred on 26 October 2022 at Shah Cheragh Mosque, which the Islamic State (ISIS) reportedly claimed responsibility for. Besides these, some exceptional news items are included in the qualitative data even out of these three periods. The public speeches by influential ruling figures and press briefings by the spokespersons of main governmental organizations call special attention as they can promote the official narrative and inform the propaganda apparatus. Also, the accusations and subsequent trials made in courts against protestors offer insights as to how repression was justified.

The whole process of collecting, refining, and coding data was done by the author for whom Persian is a mother tongue. In the spirit of self-reflexivity, the author acknowledges his standpoint as an educated man who resided abroad during the event. The author was not an avid participant in the event, but he followed the protest and repressive claims and actions against it. These can provide prolonged involvement in the research context and persistent observation of the case, which enhance "rigor" in qualitative inquiry.⁵⁷ Also, to avoid speaking for the data, the author made efforts to bracket existing biases or assumptions. Also, notes were taken on all preconceptions that arose about the study population in order to bracket these existing assumptions during the data collection and analysis process.

By taking a cue from other frameworks on justification analysis, the unit of analysis here is a claim, which is delivered to the public.⁵⁸ In this respect, I coded the claim makers (speakers) and addressees, as well as the means of claims-making and content of the claim. Also, the study identified political claims, which have sought to counter the popular framing of events as street protests. Then I paid attention to the normative concepts that were constitutive in framing practices applied by state actors. In the representation of analysis, the task was to detect the frames constituted



by the claims. After having categorized the frames, I also investigated the ways an integrative narrative was woven and legitimized.

Results

Recontextualization of the situation

Applicatory contestation over "the right to protest" during the uprising 2022

The analysis initially revealed that the global norm of the protest right has never been invalidated throughout the whole data. Investigating the claims related to the term "protest" shows that the term dominantly appears to emphasize the government's recognition of this right (Figure 1). That is to say, due to the global authority of people's right to protest codified in human rights treaties, no actor denied the validity of this norm. Particularly, this claim was largely repeated during the first days of street protests. Even to support the claim over respect to protest right, law enforcement actors referred to the legal discourse (both global through international law and national through the constitution) in which the right to protest has been recognized. For instance, Hadi Tahan Nazif [The spokesman of the constitution's Guardian Council] stated: "Our constitution recognized the right to protest, but what happened in recent weeks was beyond normal protest" (Mashregh News, 8 October 2022). Also, the diplomacy branch of the government, which is supposed to target an international audience, repeated this claim in official events and news conferences:

In this meeting, the head of our country's diplomacy [the foreign minister] called the peaceful protest as the right of every nation ... (Mashregh news, 25 September 2022)

However, law enforcement actors often denied diagnosis of the ongoing situation as a protest and thus rejected the application of protest rights to the ongoing dissents. Using the strategy of applicatory contestation over the norm of protest right through meaning-

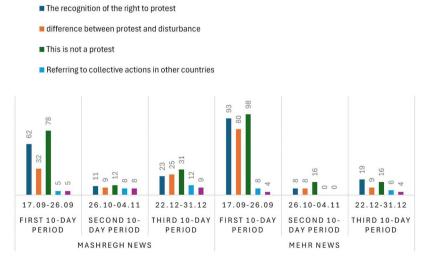


Figure 1. Number of main claims around the term "protest" in three 10-day periods selected for qualitative analysis.



making practices, the actors challenged its normative pressure. By bordering the type of protest and then labelling the unrest at hand as so-called destructive types of collective actions in their speech acts, policing actors sought to securitize the situation, and activate extraordinary measures, even in the first days of discontent's outbreaks:

The president clarified: "There is nothing wrong with protesting, but riot is not acceptable anywhere in the world, because it endangers the safety of people and society." (Mehr news, 23 September 2022)

This reframing practice keeps the police away from the accusation of protest rights violation and makes the use of force possible. By much repetition of their claims and providing visual and lexical support, the governmental narrative of the uprising quickly crafted the frame of alleged riot:

Bahadri Jahormi [The government's spokesperson] said: "The government's analysis is that there is dissatisfaction, and the protest originates from this issue, but disturbances, murders, destruction, desecration, etc., do not originate from dissatisfaction" ... In another part of the meeting, the government spokesperson emphasized that there is a difference between protestors and rioters, and emphasized: "We distinguish between those who protest and those who are the leaders of the riots, even among those who speak rude words, we must differentiate." (Mehr News, 30 October 2022)

Knowledge production on the difference between protest and riot

Further analysis shows that policing actors openly declared that only protesters who agree in advance to engage in the permitting process and follow police-determined guidelines will be accorded the protection of their rights to free speech and peaceful assembly. An epistemic practice to support the claim on the difference between protest and riot is done by reviewing other societies' actions and referring to them. For instance, in a video titled "The law of Protest in four Corners of the World," the news outlet produced social knowledge by narrating the supposed "demonstration laws" in four countries including Canada, Britain, Russia, and China, and concluded that:

According to international covenants, the right to assembly and protest is considered a part of human rights, but the principle of having a permit is a necessary condition for protests and gatherings. (Mashregh News, 22 November 2022)

This meaning-making practice seeking legitimacy via societal expectations is applied here by political actors to amass authority over their arguments about countering the protest frame of the uprising and constructing the frames of disturbance and chaos.

Performing knowledge on securitizing the situation

Further knowledge on the deviation of initial protests towards disruptions and riots was produced and spread by policing actors. The social knowledge sought to mainly link the misuse of national unrest to exogenous sources such as regime oppositions or foreign agents. The rising usage of the words riot, disturbance, foreign agents, and enemy during the timespan signal this trend. These claimmaking practices eventually informed security discourse by signifying street events at play as existential threats to sovereignty principles and non-interference norms. For instance, an analysis piece, written by Mr. Imani in the state-owned newspaper Keyhan, was reported:



The recent riots were not a spontaneous social issue, but rather an engineered and anti-security operation, which aimed to exploit grievances and discontent. However, it failed. (Mashregh News, 19 December 2022)

Even though such claims were mostly left unevidenced, the repetition and widespread of them perform their naturalization.

Construction of security frames and identification of actors

The analysis further paid attention to the ways counter-frames were constructed by policing actors. It is mainly applied to de-legitimate the state's opponents through othering, on the one hand, and to legitimate the counter-mobilization of repressive agents, on the other. The study here investigates how policing actors not only constructed threatening subjects through speech acts but also sought to legitimate their claims by appealing to the moral authority of global norms.

Authority of counter-terrorism norm and constitution of terrorist subject

Since 11 September 2001, the UN and various institutions have contributed to steady norm production on counter-terrorism, creating a specific "soft law ecosystem," 59 which leaves an opportunity for individual states to define and interpret the norms. As the data indicates, this frame was also constructed by policing actors shortly after the demonstrations began. The quantitative analysis of the corpus shows the prevalence of labelling protestors and their supporters as terrorists. The term "terror" and its derivations have been used 983 times by Mashregh News, and 1353 times by Mehr News during the whole period. In particular, this framing became heated after the only terrorist attack on 26 October amidst the uprising. Despite the condemnation of this attack by all Iranian opposing forces, the law-and-order actors took this political opportunity to project the counter-frame of terrorism, and accused the protestors:

According to Mehr reporter, in a televised interview explaining today's terrorist incident in Shiraz, Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi said: "Today, a large number of our noble people, who were engaged in prayer, were shot and many people were martyred and others were injured" ... Vahidi continued: "We all must take care, as this wave of riots that caused people's annoyance in the past days is being taken by the enemy in other ways towards dangerous paths, and terrorist groups took advantage of the atmosphere of the riot to act." (Mehr News, 26 October 2022)

Also, there were many claims against independent reporters and satellite Iranian channels abroad as well as artists and celebrities supporting the protests by redefining the term cultural terrorism⁶⁰ and coining the term media terrorism. Along with the nationwide internet blackout⁶¹, activists and celebrities whose accounts of the street events deviated from the official story were labelled as terrorism supporters in such neo-authoritarian contexts. By securitizing the situation, these stigmas were used to threaten journalists who tried to report other narratives than the official narrative and celebrities who tried to show sympathy with the uprising in social media.

Dr. Raisi [the president] further enumerated cultural terror as one type of terrorism, and noted: ... "But sometimes terror is cultural. In this type of terror, the truth is targeted with deceit and lies, and an attempt is made to remove the facts from the cycle of information and communication." (Mashregh news, 25 October 2022)



In another example, the news agency reported from a state actor:

According to Mashreq, Mohammad Mahdi Esmaili, the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance wrote an article in the "Iran" newspaper: ... "On the one hand, we have a party that believes in a strong Iran, which pursues the excellence of this country and nation in the shadow of justice, progress, transformation, and freedom, and believes that shortcomings and problems should not make us forget the main path and goal. On the opposite front, we see the indecisive force that found an incident as a tool and an opportunity to encourage riot, destruction, and media terrorism." (Mashregh news, 9 November 2022)

Authority of territorial integrity norm and constitution of separatist subject

The norm of respect for territorial integrity is globally acknowledged. But the norm was appealed by policing actors to constitute a separatism counter-frame. This labelling act of protest participants as separatists was particularly evoked to silence the protesters in ethnic-minority regions and geographically peripheral locations. Given the Kurdish ethnic-minority origin of Mahsa (Jina) Amini, the peripheral regions including religious and ethnic minor groups in Iran were extensively engaged in the protests. This provided a discursive opportunity for the misuse of the territorial integrity norm to construct separatist subjects. In an example, the invocation of the norm to demarcate protesting and transform the ongoing protest over the system's red line is shown:

The member of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee of the Parliament said: "People's protests are accepted, but changing it in a way that is against national interests and territorial integrity is the red line of the political system." (Mehr News, 30 September 2022)

Then, separatist claims were connected to protestors, and the protest was reframed turbulence, as shown in this news entry:

Quds Corps commander of Gilan province stated: "After the death of Mahsa Amini, the enemy started the actions ahead of its schedule, which led to the quick reaction of the people and the police and security forces" ... He listed separatism as one of the important goals of creating turbulence in the Islamic Republic [of Iran] (Mehr News, 4 October 2022)

The counter-frame, in particular, led to the bloodiest events during the protest in peripheral areas.

The counter-frame of organized riots: anti-colonial values and the constitution of foreign agent subject

Based on the data analysis, another counter-frame is also constructed by state actors. The authority of anti-colonial values is invoked by policing advocates to make the frame of organized riots and label protestors as foreign agents. Given the longevity of the enemization strategy against the West in Iranian political discourse⁶², the labels of *foreign agency*, *cultural penetration*, *cultural war* and else are prevalent in the securitization of the situation. For instance, when the uprising brought up gender equality requests, Mehr News wrote in an analysis that "Human rights, especially women's rights, have been a familiar and classic pretext for Western countries to intervene in the internal affairs of other nations" (15 December 2022).

This frame challenged the spontaneity of the protest to inform non-intervention and sovereign principles, and legitimate suppression. In this regard, claims were made to subjectivate protestors as either deceived or conscious agents of foreign forces. For instance, in an official statement by the Ministry of Intelligence published



just a couple of weeks after the beginning of the street protests, the protesters were labelled as foreign agents and mercenaries among other stigmas:

Due to the increase in the activity of foreign supporters and other organizers of terror and destruction, their internal mercenaries got out of their hiding places, and thus, the possibility of identifying and arresting them became more and more available. (Mashregh News, 30 September 2022)

These practices could legitimate extraordinary measures, particularly against those called direct agents by security forces.

Police forces as security defenders

Data shows that the term "security defenders" was coined in the first days, and widely ascribed to police forces by almost all state actors. As appeared in the corpora, the term "security defender" exceeds 249 times in Mashregh News and 413 times in Mehr News. For example, in a visual report, the narrator noted:

Insulting security defenders is one of the tactics that rioters have resorted to anger them. (Mehr News, 23 October 2022)

As other studies show, these meaning-making practices can inform "police knowledge," which is how the police forces perceive their roles and the surrounding society, thus acting accordingly.⁶³

Suggestions of remedies

Normalization of repression: appealing to other state's reactions to protests

As mentioned above, referring to other societies can amass the authority over the actors' agenda, and make the claim appropriate in world polity. In particular, the reference points here are Western societies, which are supposed to be the defenders of human rights. For instance, in a report:

The British interior minister has announced his plans to widely suppress protesters, including environmental activists ... The "Independent" newspaper wrote on Saturday that British Interior Secretary Suella Braverman recently said that she would give the police new powers to take a "more proactive" approach to some protests. (Mashregh News, 15 October 2022)

This practice, as already mentioned, can make the following extraordinary measures appropriate, particularly in the eyes of targeted audiences.

Authority of sovereignty norms and legitimation of repression

After constructing counter-frames and securitizing protests, the totality of the sovereignty consolidation norm cluster is appealed to direct the appropriate reaction to the situation at hand. In particular, the invocation of global norms to legitimize repressive actions has been employed by the state's foreign affairs and global public relations sectors to obscure international perceptions of events and create divisions within the global civil society regarding the defence of protesters' rights. For instance:

In this telephone conversation [with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of France], Amir Abdollahian [the Iranian foreign minister], while strongly criticizing foreign interventionist statements regarding Iran's internal developments, said: "The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran considers peaceful protest to be the right of the people, but these legitimate demands are completely different from organized riots and terrorist acts who have targeted

the security of Iran and the lives and property of our people." ... Also, referring to the West's behaviour in resorting to double standards, the head of the diplomatic service added: "It is surprising that dealing with riots in Europe is a good and acceptable practice, but the same thing is considered repression in Iran!" He also told his French counterpart: "We will not allow any party from inside or outside to target the country's national security." (Mashregh News, 12 October 2022)

The manipulation of the audience's understanding of the situation and the activation of security discourse eventually enabled the policing apparatus to make paternalist claims, through which repression is introduced as the people's demand for protection. For example:

The spokesman of the [the constitution's] Guardian Council said: "The authorities' decisive action against rioters and disrupters of society's security is the demand of the people, who are filled with hatred and anger after seeing these scenes." (Mashregh News, 23 December 2022)

Constitution of a legitimizing narrative

The whole practices by neo-authoritarian policing actors are targeted to re-contextualize the situation and transform people's understanding of the protest into a security matter. To show conformity to the protest right but not to apply it, actors turned towards a narrative in which protests around the death of Mahsa (Jina) Amini quickly deviated by external enemies. In a statement for the explanation of street events issued by the highest-level National Security Council, the narrative was represented in this way:

The regrettable death of Ms. "Mahsa Amini" after being in the moral security police unit of Tehran ... caused the enemy to accelerate the implementation of its complex hybrid war plan, originally designed for different circumstances, and bring it forward ahead of schedule. ... The peaceful protests were quickly steered towards illegal activities and street riots through negative propaganda. ... In a short period, with the involvement of professional and organized rioters, under the leadership of the English-Saudi media, they escalated into chaos and acts of terrorism. (Mashregh News, 03 December 2022)

The counter-narrative of the uprising constructed as exogenously exploited could contribute to bypassing the protest right and activating sovereign norms. In a dialectical relationship, as the analysis shows, the strategic narrative and constructed counter-frames inscribe meaning to each other and legitimize the securitization of the protest, and then exceptional suppression.

Discussion

The study investigates policing discourse in neo-authoritarian governance, through which their policing coalitions seek to legitimize the repression of protests. It joins the scholarship highlighting the role of security justifications in repressing protests.⁶⁴ Then, it pays attention to epistemic politics to complement these studies by exploring how such justifications are constructed and legitimized. To do that, the article integrates the literature of recontextualization with the recent relational articulation of authorities as epistemic capital. This theoretical framework enables us to investigate epistemic politics for turning the discursive context of protest into a security matter in neo-authoritarian governance. As the case, the study analyses policing discourse



during and after the repressive crackdown of the 2022 Iranian uprising called "Woman, Life, Freedom." To include the whole discursive apparatus of the state, all news entries of two state-supported news agencies during a 4-month timespan were collected, which consists of a total of c. 1.4 million words corpus.

The findings reveal how the state actors first recognized the validity of the masterframe of the right to protest, but then challenged the application of the right by making claims on the ongoing events and refraining from labelling them as protests. In doing so, they first actively produced social knowledge on the demarcation of protests from disturbances and rioting acts by referring to other societies' legal discourse and protest policing practices. Although compliance with reference groups' actions is not a codified principle, an emergent scholarship has also confirmed that political actors, even in the so-called rogue states, appeal to other societies' actions to increase the appropriateness of their arguments. This practice enabled the construction of counter-frames turning the protest into a security matter.

Subsequently, they were involved in the construction of counter-frames to enhance their claims. As existing literature has successfully indicated, policing actors apply the stigmatization of activists and their goals as counter-framing techniques.⁶⁶ In particular, identity demarcation in Iran's state discourse is largely used as a tool of autocratic legitimation. 67 The further analysis identified the interplay of four international norms codified in global scripts, upon which law enforcement actors made claims on positioning actors and framing social events. Policing actors, first, appealed to the authority of counter-terrorism norms to justify terrorist frames. As legal studies confirm, the global consensus about the imperative of combating terrorism was so compelling that authoritarian actors could get away with their repressive practices simply by renaming their opponents as "terrorists". 68 Also, they invoked the territorial integrity to constitute separatist subjects, which were largely used in peripheral ethnic-minority regions. This separatist counter-frame, used to justify suppressions - particularly in Iran's Kurdish regions - is confirmed by other recent studies.⁶⁹ This study, however, complements this literature by identifying how the unilateral interpretation of the territorial integrity norm is constitutive in constructing the counter-frame. Moreover, state actors sought to manipulate anti-colonial values, which informed the construction of the foreign agency frame, and then activated the non-interference norm. This finding is in line with the recent studies arguing that the abuse of anti-colonial values has been extensively applied in neo-authoritarian politics to turn any social discontent into a culture war context. 70 The sovereignty scripts, eventually, were called to legitimize the repression of protests after the securitization of them upon the constructed frames. Such epistemic practices, simultaneously, linked the security defending tasks to police forces. The analysis also revealed that neo-authoritarian actors referred to how other societies respond to events they frame as riots, using this as a means to normalize and justify repression. The study hereby disclosed how neoauthoritarian actors masterfully take the discursive opportunities provided by global norms contestations to securitize the situation and hereby justify their repressive agenda.

In total, epistemic practices were applied to construct a strategic narrative including several disturbance and rioting frames and activate securitization actions justifying extraordinary means, which were repressive acts in the case of social protests. Neoauthoritarian policing actors, by these practices of applicatory norm contestation and counter-frames constructions, tried to circumvent people's right to protest and

the consequences of its direct "normative pressure" on the police apparatus. In this narrative, as data showed, repression was introduced as people's demand for protection.

These rhetorics, as also confirmed by some other studies, dehumanize protestors and then activate the state's right of legitimate defense to misuse force against protestors. 72 This study reflects on the theoretical aspects, as it shows that the epistemic practices of recontextualization are constitutive of securitization discourse. Furthermore, it argues that when legal authority does not work for legitimizing the repression of protests, recontextualization practices involve collecting the authority of alternative global norms under the authoritarian agenda that contests the ones being promoted by civil society.

Conclusion

The study examined how neo-authoritarian actors, through epistemic practices, attempt to legitimize the repression of citizens during social protests despite lacking legal justification. The findings highlight the authority of the "sovereignty consolidation norm cluster" in the constitution of a strategic narrative, through which protests are recontextualized into a security matter. 73 By taking the "resiliency of global norm clusters" into account⁷⁴, this regime of epistemic practices can endanger democratization politics.

The broader implication of this study is to point out the mutation in the neoauthoritarian policing discourse. While the target of any contentious politics is to challenge authorities through contending narratives⁷⁵, neo-authoritarian authorities, as the study illustrated, try to amass other sources of legitimacy from the "external structure of legitimation"⁷⁶ – i.e. international (norm) regime – to counter-attack the authority of street politics in any given situation. In social movement literature, "repertoire of knowledge practices" is defined as "the set of practices that foster the coordination of disconnected, local, and highly personal experiences and rationalities within a shared cognitive system able to provide movements and their supporters with a common orientation for making claims and acting collectively". 77 In turn, this study's findings signal the invention of a "neo-authoritarian policing repertoire of knowledge practices" that can make a shared cognitive system for the epistemic governance of repressions at the time of contentious politics.

This policing repertoire of knowledge practices can inform strong "patterns of communication" for neo-authoritarian states. As the findings of this study revealed, the governing technology works through the strategic invocations of global norms in the constitution of securitizing counter-frames of protests, whereby the suppression of dissents is legitimized. Such authoritarian conduct can recontextualize any dissent to the realm of security, which leads to "shutting down the Streets". 79 If the aim of classic policing protest strategies was controlling the mass demonstrations, the new models bypass the core meta-frame of protesting rights through epistemic politics, thereby suppressing them. Moreover, by considering "authoritarian learning," these models can be easily diffused within inter- and transnational networks of authoritarian policing groups⁸⁰, which is evidenced, for instance, in the recent spread of the Russian "foreign agent" law.81

Given the states' privileged position on sovereignty matters in international law, the policing repertoire of knowledge practices can constitute a condition of "epistemic



closeness," leading to the reproduction of dominance relations in discursive fields. These mutations in neo-authoritarian discourse can shield neo-authoritarian actors from global civil society's normative pressure, on the one hand, and persuade internal targeted audiences, on the other. These epistemic politics push any civic protests into securitized situations and hence block any power transition and democratization processes. Further studies should address varieties of these practices seeking to legitimize the suppression of civic protests. For instance, they can investigate the neo-authoritarian epistemic practices for securitizing dissents in highly conflictual regions that might even trigger civil wars as witnessed in the Syrian revolution in 2011 and the Venezuelan continuous post-election crises. Overall, much attention should be paid to disentangling the policing repertoire of knowledge practices in both social movements and authoritarianism scholarships.

Notes

- 1. Gerschewski, "The Three Pillars of Stability."
- 2. Josua, "The Legitimation of Repression in Autocracies."
- 3. Wall, "The Right to Protest."
- 4. For more explanation on counterframing practices, please see Benford and Hunt, "Interactional Dynamics in Public Problems Marketplaces."
- 5. Dukalskis, The Authoritarian Public Sphere; Dean, "Authoritarian Governmentality."
- 6. Della Porta and Pavan, "Repertoires of Knowledge Practices."
- 7. Bueger, "Making Things Known."
- 8. Robinson, "Making Migration Knowable and Governable."
- 9. for instance, Krasteva and Vladisavljević, "Securitisation versus Citizenship in the Balkan States"; Gillham, "Securitizing America."
- 10. Edel and Josua, "How Authoritarian Rulers Seek to Legitimize Repression"; Vuori, "Illocutionary Logic and Strands of Securitization."
- 11. Holm, "Algeria: Securitisation of State/Regime, Nation and Islam."
- 12. Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, Security: A New Framework for Analysis; Laustsen and Wæver, "In Defense of Religion"; Balzacq, "The Three Faces of Securitization."
- 13. Vuori, "Illocutionary Logic and Strands of Securitization."
- 14. Dean, "Authoritarian Governmentality."
- 15. Khatam, "Mahsa Amini's Killing, State Violence, and Moral Policing in Iran."
- 16. Fadaee, "Woman, Life, Freedom Movement."
- 17. Amnesty International, "Amnesty International Report 2022/23," 197.
- 18. Human Rights Watch, "Iran."
- 19. Weizman, "Recontextualization Practices."
- 20. van Oers, "The Fallacy of Decontextualization."
- 21. Van Leeuwen, "Discourse as the Recontextualization of Social Practice: A Guide," 141.
- 22. Alasuutari, "Authority as Epistemic Capital."
- 23. Beetham, The Legitimation of Power.
- 24. Jackson and Bradford, "Police Legitimacy"; Bonner and Dammert, "Constructing Police Legitimacy during Protests."
- 25. Bondes and Heep, "Conceptualizing the Relationship Between Persuasion and Legitimacy."
- "Weaponizing Counter-Terrorism."
- 27. Abulof, "Normative Concepts Analysis."
- 28. Wiener, "The Dual Quality of Norms and Governance beyond the State"; Finnemore and Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change."
- 29. Grigorescu, Democratic Intergovernmental Organizations?; Grigorescu and Replogle, "Interactions between International Norms."
- 30. Koopmans and Olzak, "Discursive Opportunities and the Evolution of Right-Wing Violence in Germany."
- 31. Stake, "Qualitative Case Studies."



- 32. Gobo, "Re-Conceptualizing Generalization: Old Issues in a New Frame"; Gomm, Hammersley, and Foster, Case Study Method: Key Issues, Key Texts.
- 33. Cottle, Mediatized Conflict.
- 34. Boussalis, Dukalskis, and Gerschewski, "Why It Matters What Autocrats Say."
- 35. In its English "about us" section, Mehr News states: "Belonging to the Islamic Development Organization, Mehr Media Group has access to first handed and trustworthy news within the Iranian Government" (https://en.mehrnews.com/news/159449). Lack of an official English version website, Mashregh News in its Persian "about us" section writes: "We have come under the name of "Mashreq" to protect today's Islamic Iran for tomorrow" (https:// www.mashreghnews.ir/news/699137/).
- 36. Strauss, Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists.
- 37. Denzin, Sociological Methods.
- 38. Van Leeuwen, "Discourse as the Recontextualization of Social Practice: A Guide," 143.
- 39. Van Leeuwen, "Legitimation in Discourse and Communication."
- 40. Alasuutari and Oadir, Epistemic Governance: Social Change in the Modern World, 149.
- 41. Balzacq, "A Theory of Securitization: Origins, Core Assumptions, and Variants," 2.
- 42. Alasuutari and Qadir, Epistemic Governance: Social Change in the Modern World.
- 43. Cavanaugh, "Performativity."
- 44. Entman, "Framing"; Snow, "Framing and Social Movements."
- 45. Alasuutari and Qadir, Epistemic Governance: Social Change in the Modern World.
- 46. Polletta, "Contending Stories."
- 47. Alasuutari and Qadir, Epistemic Governance: Social Change in the Modern World, 32.
- 48. Khaldarova and Pantti, "Fake News: The Narrative Battle over the Ukrainian Conflict."
- 49. Ylä-Anttila and Luhtakallio, "Justifications Analysis"; Van Leeuwen, "Legitimation in Discourse and Communication"; Abulof, "Normative Concepts Analysis."
- 50. Qadir and Syväterä, "The Moral Authority of Science"; Rekola and Paloniemi, "Politics of Knowledge Use."
- 51. Equivalent to "اعتراض" in Persian: it should be noted that the Persian term is used for both major meanings of the term "protest," one as feeling or expression of disapproval and another as an action expressing disapproval.
- 52. Equivalent to "اغتشاش" in Persian. However, the Persian equivalent conveys more negative and violent connotations of the word, which makes it quite close to the term "riot."
- in Persian "شورش" in Persian
- 54. Equivalent to "آشوب" in Persian. It also conveys harsher connotations in Persian.
- 55. Blaikie, Approaches to Social Enquiry; Giese and Schnapp, "Deductive, Inductive, and Retroductive Reasoning."
- 56. Abulof, "Normative Concepts Analysis."
- 57. Guba and Lincoln, Fourth Generation Evaluation.
- 58. Koopmans and Statham, "Political Claims Analysis"; Ylä-Anttila and Luhtakallio, "Justifications Analysis."
- 59. ECNL, "Counter-Terrorism & Human Rights: Soft Law, Hard Consequences."
- 60. The term is generally used to describe the terrorist attacks against cultural heritages and illicit trade of cultural properties, etc., However, it is re-contextualized in the Iranian governmental discourse as the data shows.
- 61. Internet disrupted in Iran amid protests over the death of Mahsa Amini NetBlocks, "Internet Disrupted in Iran amid Protests over Death of Mahsa Amini - NetBlocks."
- 62. Adib-Moghaddam, "Discourse and Violence."
- 63. Della Porta, Peterson, and Herbert, The Policing of Transnational Protest.
- 64. Krasteva and Vladisavljević, "Securitisation versus Citizenship in the Balkan States"; Pratt and Rezk, "Securitizing the Muslim Brotherhood"; Bonner and Dammert, "Constructing Police Legitimacy during Protests"; Edel and Josua, "How Authoritarian Rulers Seek to Legitimize Repression."
- 65. Pi Ferrer, Alasuutari, and Tervonen-Gonçalves, "Looking at Others in National Policy-Making"; Alasuutari, The Synchronization of National Policies.
- 66. Fallon, Aunio, and Kim, "Decoupling International Agreements from Domestic Policy."
- 67. Selvik, "Autocratic Legitimation in Iran."
- 68. Vermeulen and Scheinin, "Unilateral Exceptions to International Law."



- 69. Hassaniyan and Stansfield, "The Kurdish Protest Movement and the Islamic Republic of Iran."
- 70. Zhang, "Postcolonial Nationalism and the Global Right."
- 71. Grigorescu and Replogle, "Interactions between International Norms."
- 72. Hess and Martin, "Repression, Backfire, and The Theory of Transformative Events."
- 73. MacFarlane and Sabanadze, "Sovereignty and Self-Determination"; Lantis and Wunderlich, "Reevaluating Constructivist Norm Theory."
- 74. Lantis and Wunderlich, "Resiliency Dynamics of Norm Clusters."
- 75. Polletta, "Contending Stories"; Snow, "Social Movements as Challenges to Authority."
- 76. Qadir and Alasuutari, "The Discursive Side of Sociological Institutionalism in the Study of Religion," 2.
- 77. Della Porta and Pavan, "Repertoires of Knowledge Practices," 297.
- 78. Josua, "Justifications of Repression in Autocracies."
- 79. Starr, Fernandez, and Scholl, Shutting Down the Streets.
- 80. Heydemann and Leenders, "Authoritarian Learning and Authoritarian Resilience."
- 81. Rikhter, "'Foreign Agents' in Media Regulation."

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Notes on contributor

Amir Barjasteh is a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University. He has been affiliated with the Tampere research group for Cultural and Political Sociology (TCuPS), and the Epistemic Governance (EG) seminar at the University of Helsinki. His research areas include (neo-)authoritarian and illiberal modes of governance, discursive and epistemic politics, and global sociology.

ORCID

Amir Barjasteh http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9996-076X

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