

Chapter 9. Old Habits Die Hard: Leaders' Prior Military Experience, Repression, and Civil War

Abstract

Chapter 9 addresses the recurring question of why domestic political opposition precipitates a civil war in some (authoritarian) countries but not in others. Drawing on the literature concerning civil-military relations, this chapter argues that because leaders with prior military experience have a greater tendency to repress their citizenry by means of indiscriminate violence, they are likely to enrage opposition sympathizers who in turn are more likely to join dissident organizations in the effort to avenge their grievances; the end result of this process is often civil war. Three historical case studies and a two-stage statistical analysis provide evidence that a country whose top executive has a military background is more likely to indiscriminately repress popular uprisings and, consequently, more vulnerable to the eruption of civil violence. This finding implies that in its attempt to reduce the proliferation of civil war, the United States should help foreign countries to institutionalize civilian control over the military; this is a key feature of democratic political systems.