Indicators of Political Suppression in Fragile Democracies: A Qualitative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify and analyze key indicators of political suppression as experienced by civil society actors within the institutional framework of a fragile democracy, using Iran as a case study. The research employed a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews with 14 purposefully selected participants residing in Tehran, including activists, journalists, students, and former political candidates. The participants were chosen based on their direct involvement in political or civic engagement. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. Open, axial, and selective coding techniques were used to extract and organize emergent themes, with particular attention to institutional, social, and psychological dimensions of suppression. Three major themes were identified: restrictive institutional practices, psychological and social intimidation, and suppression of collective action. Within these themes, key subthemes emerged, such as legal manipulation, electoral obstruction, misuse of the judiciary and security forces, social isolation mechanisms, and the criminalization of protest. Participants described experiences of legal harassment, surveillance, reputational attacks, and targeted economic repression. The suppression was often embedded in administrative and legal procedures, creating a "plausible" yet coercive framework for political control. Interviewees also highlighted the emotional toll of living under constant political pressure, which included fear, disillusionment, and self-censorship. The findings underscore how fragile democracies suppress political participation through legally sanctioned yet fundamentally repressive mechanisms. By documenting firsthand experiences of suppression, the study reveals the nuanced and systemic ways in which democratic processes are undermined. These insights offer both theoretical and practical implications for identifying and addressing political repression in hybrid regimes worldwide.

Keywords: *Political suppression; fragile democracy; authoritarianism; Iran; qualitative research; civil society; repression indicators; legal manipulation.*

Introduction

In recent decades, the concept of democracy has been increasingly contested, not only in overtly authoritarian regimes but also in formally democratic states where institutions and norms have become compromised or hollowed out. These so-called "fragile democracies"—polities that formally uphold democratic procedures such as elections, legislative representation, and a constitution—nonetheless experience profound and systematic erosion of civil liberties, political rights, and institutional checks and balances (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). While authoritarianism often manifests through abrupt seizure of power, fragile democracies typically exhibit subtler and incremental patterns of political suppression, making them difficult to identify and even harder to counteract. These repressive

trends frequently emerge through legal manipulation, judicial co-optation, administrative censorship, and intimidation of dissenting voices. Understanding how political suppression operates under the guise of democratic governance is essential for safeguarding democratic integrity and promoting civic resilience.

Political suppression refers to the array of strategies employed by state or affiliated actors to constrain political participation, reduce civic space, and neutralize opposition (Schedler, 2002). While overt acts of repression such as violence, imprisonment, or bans on political parties remain significant, contemporary suppression increasingly involves indirect, non-violent, or "legal" tactics that retain a veneer of democratic legitimacy (Diamond, 2019). These include the selective application of laws, manipulation of electoral procedures, media control, and the weaponization of bureaucratic and judicial institutions. This phenomenon is particularly salient in hybrid regimes and electoral autocracies, where political authorities rely on democratic facades to maintain international credibility while simultaneously curtailing substantive freedoms (Bermeo, 2016). In these contexts, citizens may still vote or assemble, but only within tightly regulated frameworks that ensure outcomes favorable to incumbent regimes.

Iran serves as a paradigmatic example of a fragile democracy where institutional mechanisms of political participation coexist with pervasive suppression. Formally structured as an Islamic Republic with elected institutions such as the Parliament (Majlis) and the Presidency, Iran also features a network of unelected bodies, including the Guardian Council and Supreme Leader, with the authority to overrule or disqualify elected officials (Arjomand, 2009). Despite periodic elections, the state maintains significant control over political discourse through media monopolization, selective prosecutions, and surveillance of civil society organizations (Golkar, 2015). Numerous human rights organizations have documented patterns of political suppression in Iran, such as the preemptive disqualification of reformist candidates, arrests of activists and journalists, restrictions on peaceful protest, and retaliatory measures against dissenting citizens (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Nevertheless, much of this suppression is executed under the cover of legality, thus complicating efforts to detect or challenge it from within or outside the system.

The mechanisms of suppression in fragile democracies often remain underexplored due to their ambiguity and contextual specificity. Unlike in outright dictatorships, where violations of political rights are more flagrant, fragile democracies often deploy subtle techniques that allow governments to deny accusations of repression while continuing to undermine oppositional forces. For example, the use of vague legal terminology such as "acting against national security" or "propaganda against the system" has allowed authorities in multiple states, including Iran, Hungary, and Turkey, to target critics with criminal charges while maintaining a semblance of rule of law (Ginsburg & Huq, 2018). Additionally, governments often exploit state media and online surveillance to delegitimize or intimidate political activists, contributing to a climate of fear and isolation (Howard & Bradshaw, 2019).

From a theoretical standpoint, the study of political suppression in fragile democracies intersects with multiple frameworks, including democratic backsliding, state capacity, and authoritarian resilience. Scholars such as Ozan Varol (2015) have highlighted the emergence of what he terms "stealth authoritarianism"—the use of legal tools and democratic institutions to undermine democracy from within. This approach relies not on brute force, but on the calculated distortion of laws, norms, and procedures to produce a chilling effect on political dissent. Similarly, the literature on competitive authoritarianism identifies a key paradox: while elections are held regularly, they are systematically manipulated to preserve power, creating an uneven playing field for challengers (Levitsky & Way, 2010). These theoretical perspectives underscore the need for qualitative inquiry into how citizens themselves experience and interpret the manifestations of suppression in these political environments.

Despite the growing academic interest in democratic fragility and authoritarian drift, there remains a paucity of empirical studies capturing the lived experiences of individuals navigating suppressed political spaces. While quantitative indices such as the Democracy Index or Freedom House ratings provide valuable cross-national comparisons, they often fail to capture the subjective dimensions of suppression—how it is perceived, internalized, and resisted by citizens (Coppedge et al., 2020). This gap is especially salient in semi-authoritarian contexts where the lines between legality and repression are intentionally blurred. Understanding these experiences is vital not only for scholarly insight but also for informing international advocacy, civil society programming, and policy responses aimed at defending civic freedoms.

This study addresses this gap by conducting a qualitative investigation into the indicators of political suppression as perceived by individuals engaged in or exposed to political processes in Tehran, Iran. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews with civil society actors, former political candidates, journalists, and students, this research seeks to uncover the institutional, psychological, and social indicators that signal political suppression in a context where democratic institutions remain formally intact but functionally constrained. The aim is to construct an empirically grounded framework of suppression indicators that can help distinguish between legitimate state authority and repressive state behavior in fragile democratic settings.

In doing so, the study aligns with calls for more grounded, context-sensitive analyses of political repression, particularly in environments where suppression is systemic yet elusive. Scholars such as Carey (2006) and Davenport (2007) have emphasized that repression is best understood not merely through state policies but through its effects on individuals and groups. By centering the narratives of those directly affected, this research contributes to a growing body of qualitative scholarship that prioritizes voice, agency, and context in the analysis of state power. Furthermore, it responds to methodological critiques of existing repression research, which often prioritizes event-based data or top-down indicators while neglecting micro-level dynamics (Chenoweth, Perkoski, & Kang, 2017).

The implications of this research are twofold. First, it provides a conceptual map of how political suppression is recognized and experienced at the ground level, offering practical insights for human rights monitoring, legal reform, and civic resilience strategies. Second, it deepens theoretical understandings of authoritarian adaptation within democratic frameworks, highlighting the complex interplay between legality, legitimacy, and coercion. By documenting and analyzing these dynamics in the Iranian context, this study not only sheds light on a case of enduring political repression but also offers comparative insights applicable to other fragile democracies undergoing similar patterns of erosion.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences and perceived indicators of political suppression within the context of a fragile democratic system. The research adopted an interpretivist paradigm, emphasizing the subjective meanings and socio-political realities constructed by individuals who have encountered or observed acts of political suppression. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants who had firsthand experience or in-depth knowledge of political engagement and state repression in Tehran. A total of 14 participants (8 male and 6 female), including civil society activists, journalists, university students, and former local council candidates, were recruited. Inclusion criteria required participants to be over 18 years of age, reside in Tehran, and have demonstrable exposure to political or civic processes within the past five years.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, allowing for both consistency in question delivery and flexibility to explore emergent themes in greater depth. An interview guide was developed with open-ended questions focused on identifying signs, mechanisms, and consequences of political suppression. Sample questions included: "Can you describe a time when you felt your political rights were limited or violated?" and "What forms of suppression are most commonly used in your opinion?" Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and was conducted in a private, secure setting to ensure participant safety and confidentiality. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, which occurred by the fourteenth interview, as no new themes were emerging.

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using thematic content analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's six-step framework. NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to assist with the systematic coding and organization of the data. The process involved familiarization with the transcripts, generation of initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final narrative analysis. Open coding was conducted initially to identify significant indicators and experiences, followed by axial coding to explore relationships between categories, and finally selective coding to identify core themes that represented the systemic patterns of political suppression. Throughout the process, reflexivity and peer debriefing were employed to enhance the credibility and confirmability of the analysis.

Findings and Results

Theme 1: Restrictive Institutional Practices

Legal Manipulation.

Participants frequently pointed to the selective and strategic use of legal frameworks as a core indicator of political suppression. Laws were described as intentionally vague, enabling authorities to criminalize dissent under broad categories like "undermining national security" or "propaganda against the state." A former local candidate noted, "They can twist the law in a hundred ways. One minute you're a reformist, the next you're a threat." Concepts such as retroactive application of laws, legal harassment, and the overcriminalization of political expression were recurrently emphasized.

Electoral Obstruction.

Several interviewees referred to systemic interference in electoral processes, particularly through the disqualification of candidates with opposing or reformist views. Participants described vetting committees as "gatekeepers of ideology" who lacked transparency and accountability. As one university student explained, "They reject people for reasons they never disclose—sometimes, they just say 'not loyal enough.'" Complaints about manipulated vote counting and procedural bias were also widespread.

Censorship Policies.

Censorship emerged as a structural mechanism used to silence dissenting voices. Respondents described restricted access to publishing licenses, tightly controlled broadcasting environments, and ambiguous "red lines" that discouraged critical speech. A journalist participant stated, "We know the lines exist, but they never tell you where they are—you only find out when you cross them and get punished." These practices fostered a climate of constant self-censorship and editorial fear.

Misuse of Security Apparatus.

Participants consistently discussed the role of intelligence and security forces in stifling political engagement. Tactics included digital and physical surveillance, arbitrary detentions, and intimidation raids. One activist recalled, "They raided my house at 3 a.m., no warrant, just threats. They took my laptop, my phone, and said, 'Stay quiet, or else.'" The use of travel bans and security designations like "enemy agent" were also noted.

Judiciary Dependency.

The perceived lack of judicial independence was highlighted as another institutional barrier. Courts were often viewed as extensions of executive or intelligence interests, issuing politically motivated sentences and denying defendants access to fair legal representation. As one respondent noted, "The judge didn't even listen. He just repeated what the security officer said—like a script." Participants described the courts as hostile spaces where verdicts were predetermined and trials often held behind closed doors.

Theme 2: Psychological and Social Intimidation

Threatening Atmosphere.

Many participants described living under constant threat, including anonymous phone calls, visits from unknown individuals, and thinly veiled warnings from security agencies. These tactics created a pervasive environment of fear. One civil society worker explained, "After each post I write, I wonder if someone's watching me. Sometimes I get calls from unknown numbers, just breathing on the line." Such acts were subtle yet effective forms of suppression.

Social Isolation Mechanisms.

Respondents reported that their political views often led to being socially ostracized in professional or academic settings. Several mentioned colleagues distancing themselves, canceled collaborations, or even threats of dismissal. One participant stated, "They didn't fire me, but made it impossible to stay—no one talked to me, students avoided me, and then my classes were removed from the schedule." Concepts included workplace exclusion, peer alienation, and professional marginalization.

Reputational Attacks.

Participants spoke of targeted defamation campaigns aimed at undermining their credibility and character. False accusations, doctored videos, and rumors circulated by state-aligned media were described as common tools. A journalist revealed, "They aired a fake video of me on national TV, claiming I was a foreign agent. People still think it's real." These attacks often caused irreparable personal and professional damage.

Economic Repression.

A number of participants detailed economic consequences resulting from political engagement. These included being fired from public-sector jobs, having bank accounts frozen, and denial of permits or licenses necessary for livelihood. A former NGO manager recounted, "We weren't shut down officially—they just blocked our funds and refused to renew our license. We had to close ourselves."

Theme 3: Suppression of Collective Action

Protest Criminalization.

Respondents described protests as being rapidly criminalized through arbitrary arrests and the invocation of anti-terror laws. Peaceful assembly was often met with violence or preemptive detentions. One participant stated, "I was arrested before the protest even began—just for sharing the flyer online." The criminalization extended to labeling protests as riots or security threats.

Organizational Disruption.

Participants noted deliberate targeting of civil society organizations through forced closures, denial of registration, and asset seizures. An NGO founder shared, "We were told that our mission statement was 'problematic'—then came the audit, and we were shut down in a week." These tactics dismantled formal platforms for advocacy and community organizing.

Barriers to Assembly and Expression.

Government-imposed barriers to public gathering included denial of permits, last-minute venue cancellations, and heavy police presence. Online organizing was also heavily restricted. A student organizer remarked, "We booked a hall, got approval, but on the day of the event, it was suddenly 'under renovation.' This happened three times." These interruptions made sustained collective efforts extremely difficult.

Online Suppression.

Digital platforms were identified as both a space for expression and a site of repression. Participants described the blocking of websites, deletion of posts, banning of user accounts, and cyber harassment. One activist noted, "They reported my posts, hacked my profile, and then I got a message saying I'd violated community rules—though I never found out how." Internet throttling during protest periods was also repeatedly mentioned.

Targeting Movement Leaders.

Leaders of civic and protest movements were seen as particularly vulnerable. Interviewees reported arrests, forced exile, and smear campaigns against known organizers. A protest leader recalled, "They arrested my brother instead of me—just to send a message." These strategies aimed to decapitate social movements by intimidating or removing their leadership.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study illuminate the multilayered and often opaque nature of political suppression in fragile democracies, using the Iranian context as a case study. Through the narratives of 14 participants engaged in political, civil, and journalistic work in Tehran, three central themes emerged: restrictive institutional practices, psychological and social intimidation, and the suppression of collective action. These findings underscore the sophistication with which repressive strategies are deployed in systems that outwardly retain democratic structures but internally rely on authoritarian logics of control.

First, the data revealed that **legal manipulation and institutional co-optation** are key mechanisms for consolidating control while maintaining a democratic façade. Participants spoke extensively about vague legal terms such as "propaganda against the system" or "actions against national security," which allow the judiciary and security apparatus to arrest or intimidate dissidents without violating written legal codes. This aligns with the concept of *stealth authoritarianism* articulated by Varol (2015), wherein regimes rely on the formal tools of law—rather than extrajudicial violence—to erode civil liberties. It also supports Levitsky and Way's (2010) theory of *competitive authoritarianism*, where electoral institutions exist but are heavily skewed in favor of the ruling elite through manipulation, vetting procedures, and procedural bias. The repeated disqualification of reformist candidates described by participants in this study echoes this pattern, reaffirming how institutions ostensibly built for democratic inclusion are reengineered to ensure exclusion and regime stability.

Second, the findings highlight **the pervasive use of psychological pressure and social sanctions** as subtle yet effective forms of political suppression. Participants shared stories of anonymous threats, workplace ostracism, loss of employment, and reputational defamation in pro-government media. These experiences mirror what Howard

and Bradshaw (2019) describe as *networked authoritarianism*, where digital surveillance, media manipulation, and information control are used to isolate dissenters and disrupt social trust. Similarly, Ginsburg and Huq (2018) discuss how regimes delegitimize critics by creating an atmosphere of suspicion and fear, discouraging political engagement through reputational and economic risks rather than overt physical harm. The concept of "soft repression," explored in the work of Lorentzen (2014), is highly applicable here; the Iranian case shows how silencing can occur not through censorship alone, but through structural intimidation, economic penalties, and controlled rumor dissemination.

Third, the research points to **the deliberate targeting of collective action** as a hallmark of suppression in fragile democracies. Participants recounted arrests during protests, closures of NGOs, and surveillance or exile of movement leaders. These strategies aim to decapitate organized resistance and prevent the formation of political coalitions. The state's use of permit denials, internet throttling, and venue cancellations aligns with what Tufekci (2017) identifies as modern tools of disruption in networked protests—strategies that are minimally visible but highly effective in preventing mass mobilization. This also corroborates research by Chenoweth, Perkoski, and Kang (2017), which finds that repression of nonviolent resistance often focuses on disrupting movement infrastructure rather than directly confronting protestors. The Iranian case thus demonstrates that collective dissent is not merely criminalized in rhetoric, but actively dismantled through administrative obstruction and targeted suppression.

More broadly, the patterns identified in this study suggest that political suppression in fragile democracies operates on a **continuum of visibility and plausibility**. That is, rather than relying on overt violence, the state uses credible administrative tools—laws, licenses, permits, trials—to justify its actions. This plausibility allows for international deniability and domestic normalization of repression. As Bermeo (2016) argues, modern democratic backsliding rarely involves coups or martial law, but rather the incremental corrosion of accountability mechanisms, civil liberties, and pluralistic politics. Participants' testimonies reveal that this erosion is not abstract but lived— manifesting in daily constraints on speech, activism, and mobility. What emerges is a system that is legally coherent but normatively authoritarian.

Moreover, these findings carry broader implications for understanding how **citizen subjectivity and resistance evolve under soft-authoritarian contexts**. Several participants described navigating repression by adopting avoidance strategies, such as self-censorship, anonymized digital expression, or informal organizing. These adaptive behaviors align with the findings of Schatz (2009), who argues that repression in hybrid regimes leads to a form of "micro-dissidence," where resistance is localized, coded, and often indirect. While such behaviors preserve personal safety, they also reflect a constrained public sphere, where fear overrides participation. The study also highlights the emotional toll of suppression, with many participants expressing fatigue, anxiety, and disillusionment. This emotional dimension is underexplored in repression research but is critical to understanding how suppression affects not just activism, but the broader political culture.

Importantly, the Iranian context provides insights that may resonate across other fragile democracies experiencing similar democratic decay. From Hungary's control of civil society and Poland's judicial overhaul to Turkey's suppression of opposition media, the global landscape increasingly reflects the Iranian model of "lawful" authoritarianism. As Diamond (2019) cautions, these regimes do not need to eliminate elections or outlaw parties— they only need to ensure that such institutions serve the incumbent's interests. By documenting the specific techniques used in Iran, this study contributes to a comparative understanding of how authoritarian resilience is maintained through legality, legitimacy, and coercion.

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