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The Military and Revolutions: Simulating Civil-Military Relations during Mass Uprisings

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Abstract: During revolutions, strategic interactions between civilian policymakers, armed forces, and opposition groups shape political outcomes, most importantly whether a regime stands or falls. Students from advanced industrial democracies frequently find such dynamics counterintuitive, even after completing readings and engaging in traditional instruction methods. We therefore sought to improve pedagogical outcomes by designing a simulation based on the scenarios akin to those witnessed during the Arab Spring and Ukraine's Euromaidan Revolution. To this end, we divided students into four teams, representing: the regime, the armed forces, and two distinct groups of anti-regime dissidents. Rule sets were designed to incorporate the best recent scholarship on each category of actors' behavior, such as military units' probability of defecting to protestors and riot polices' ability to repress urban uprisings. By forcing student teams to make decisions under time pressure we obliged them to wrestle with the uncertainties and fears of betrayal inherent in complex civil-military emergencies.

Introduction

Political science students struggle to grasp the complex dynamics of revolutionary moments: when mass protests threaten authoritarian governments and security forces are called into the streets. The outcomes of these events can also be perplexing. Why do large and well-organized movements, such as those in Myanmar (2007-2008) and Iran (2009), sometimes fail

despite developing seemingly unstoppable momentum? While others precipitate the rapid fall of hitherto robust regimes, such as transpired in Romania (1989), Tunisia (2011), and Egypt (2011)? Despite the growing academic literature on the topic, as well as the barrage of images and news stories, it is still often difficult for students to understand the motivations and strategies of real world actors in such volatile and high risk situations—and how they interact to produce history changing outcomes.

Traditional teaching techniques, focused on readings, lecture, and discussion, do not always allow students to fully internalize the dilemmas of revolutions—from the angst of dictators, to the ambivalence of the military, to the hopes and fears of protestors. Indeed, the academic literature has focused heavily on structural factors that precede the emergence of crises or on only one or two variables that explain their outcomes: such as the military's tendency to defect when confronting protestors (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011) or the ways that dictatorships manipulate security forces to defend their interests through counterbalancing (De Bruin 2018) or recruiting and promoting based on perceived loyalty (Roessler 2011). Another reason students struggle to internalize this academic literature is the prevalence of quantitative methodologies with which they often lack familiarity.

Research shows that active learning techniques can convey a better understanding of complex political phenomena by allowing students to experience events for themselves and get inside the heads of important actors, albeit in a simulated form (Federking 2005; Jiménez 2015; Haynes 2015). We therefore developed a simulation on civil-military relations with the aim of exposing students to the motivations and strategic calculations facing decision-makers whenever authoritarian regimes find their continued rule contested in the streets. Besides grounding

students' classroom learning in concrete experiences, we also aimed through this simulation to help students develop teamwork and negotiating skills.

Learning Objectives

We designed the simulation around four key substantive learning goals that we felt students would struggle to understand from the readings alone or were drawn from works we did not have the space to assign. First, we wanted to inculcate the importance of physical and symbolic terrain and how they shape the tactical choices of actors. Mass protests tend to congregate around large, culturally important squares, such as Paris' Place St. Michel or Egypt's Tahir Square. Similarly, military units tend to target symbolic buildings when they seize power, such as the Presidential Palace, to demonstrate strength and galvanize others to their side (Singh 2014).

Second, we sought to emphasize the perils inherent to military deployment during revolutionary crises. The army has the discipline, firepower, and training to rapidly quell mass dissent—as evidenced in China's suppression of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and the USSR's brutal crushing of the 1956 Hungarian demonstrations. Yet, when ordered to fire on protestors, rank-and-file soldiers often defect and the military high command may even overthrow the government rather than witness its units fracture (Barany 2016; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). Reliance on military force, in short, is a powerful and yet unreliable tool with which to suppress protests.

Third, we wished to convey the capabilities and limitations of the other security forces in a dictator's arsenal. The regular army's tendency to defect has led many regimes to invest in

parallel forces: from riot police to praetorian guards to youth brigades to other internal security agencies, such as the Middle East's ubiquitous mukhabaraks (Sayigh 2011). Indeed, the police and intelligence services ordinarily conduct day-to-day repression in authoritarian regimes and are usually the first line of defense against protestors (Svolik 2012). Their loyalty is ensured through personal, ideological, ethnic, and/or sectarian recruitment. Yet, their generally small size often enables mass demonstrations to grow too large, over-stretching the capabilities of irregular units and plunging regimes into so-called "end game" scenarios.

Finally, we wanted to stress the importance of bargaining and the difficulties of making credible commitments in the midst of revolution. The diversity of actors involved in these crises —including factions of the regime, various security units, and an often fragmented opposition— frequently means that no single group can prevail relying solely on its own resources. Negotiation and alliances are thus necessary, but bring with them dangers and insecurity as the evolving situation leads actors to abandon their promises or even double-cross their partners.

In addition to the substantive learning goals, the simulation also provided an opportunity to develop important skills such as team work, diplomacy and negotiation, and strategic thinking. Being able to successfully complete group projects is a vital workforce skill. We asked students to work in small teams and gave them some guidance on how to divide preparation duties and write a group strategy memo. We also aimed to make negotiation central to the simulation, with individuals required to communicate both within their own team and with representatives of other teams. Finally, we wanted to teach students to think strategically. If well designed, simulations can force participants to interact with the strategies of their allies and opponents—to

think down the chessboard while coping with dynamically changing situations (Hunzeker and Harkness 2014).

Our challenge was to bring the development of these skills together with the substantive material—the importance of terrain, soldiers' proclivity to defect, paramilitary forces' role, and bargaining dynamics—to create an intuitively realistic, fairly complex, and yet still manageable simulation scenario and rule structure.

The Simulation

We introduced this simulation to a Master's level seminar of 12 students that met once a week for two hours. They were assigned teams and given a packet with the scenario and rule structure one week in advance of the simulation. Each team was also given private information about their actor, including their interests and top priorities. Teams were then tasked with writing a preparatory memo that developed an initial strategy, provided guidance notes for their first round of play, and developed contingency plans for possible obstacles to their strategy. This was the only graded component of the simulation.

The Scenario

Our simulation begins with a popular uprising against the government of Panem, that has been ruled by the iron first of a personalist dictator for decades. After weeks of escalation, the opposition now occupies key sites in the city, although it is divided between pro-democracy protestors and a religious movement intent on installing a theocracy and in possession of a small underground guerrilla army. In response to the escalating crisis, the government has mobilized

both its riot police and revolutionary guards, although the army still remains in its barracks. The opposition has declared that they will continue to control the streets until the government falls. The dictator is, of course, intransigent. Game play thus begins at the outset of the so-called "end game" phase of anti-regime protests.

We purposefully based our scenario in a fictional world, cobbled together from various contexts as well as novels. Beyond the obvious reference to the Hunger Games trilogy, which sets up the government as a pretty repressive regime, we also developed a nomenclature for the scenario's different locales and actors that mixed experiences from different regions and historical cases. We used a map of Kiev for our capital city and termed the regime's praetorian guard the "revolutionary guard" (à la Iran and Libya). The non-democratic opposition's goal to install a theocratically oriented monarchy, meanwhile, harkened back to certain nineteenth and early-twentieth century European movements, such as the Spanish Carlists and French Legitimists. Students were furthermore encouraged to develop their own identities for their teams and to act "in character" during the simulation.

Our mobilization of such a diversified symbolic lexicon served important pedagogical ends. Students possess varying degrees of knowledge about current events, different geographic regions, and historical revolutions. They also have embedded assumptions about how politics function in differing places and times. We worried that if students identified the simulation with a particular real world event, they would tailor their actions to reflect what actually happened or their preconceived prejudices. To encourage students to set aside their assumptions, to level the playing field in terms of prior knowledge, to be their own decision-makers, and to think strategically, we therefore decided to develop a fictional scenario.

Rule Structure

Students were divided into four teams, representing the government, the army, the pro-democracy opposition, and the religious opposition. Their objective was to occupy a majority of the centers of power within the capital city by the end of the simulation, allowing them to retain power or shape the transition to a post-revolutionary government. Power-sharing coalitions were explicitly allowed. We designated eight such power centers, divided into government installations (the Presidential Palace, the National Assembly, the Ministry of Defense, the Intelligence Headquarters, and the Broadcasting Station) as well as central gathering sites (the Public Square, the Public Park, and Cathedral Square).

Each team possessed an initial number of units that were stationed at assigned points in the city. The government controlled equal numbers of riot police and revolutionary guards that were protecting the five key government installations. The army had troops stationed both at bases just outside the capital, which could move immediately into the city center on the first turn, and units in the countryside that took longer to arrive and could only do so over a vital bridge. The pro-democracy opposition began with approximately double the number of protestors as the religious opposition, which were divided between the Public Square and the Public Park. Although initially small, the religious opposition controlled Cathedral Square and possessed an armed unit of militants that they could deploy anywhere on their first turn. Students were provided with a detailed map of the capital, based on Kiev, indicating where the power centers were located.

Of vital importance, while the government and military possessed a fixed number of units, the opposition could grow their numbers over time. For each central gathering site an opposition team controlled at the end of a round, we rolled a die to see if they would breed one or two new protestor units.

Each round of play began with a period of negotiation, where teams could coordinate their strategy and talk to other actors. They would then write out a set of orders detailing the actions to be taken by each of their existing units. Since our simulation was enacted over a single seminar session (2 hours), we allowed approximately ten minutes of negotiations per round followed by a few minutes to submit orders. We provided the teams with a list of possible orders which included doing nothing, moving, building barricades, pushing past other units or barricades in their way, attacking other units, consenting to joint occupation of an area or site, fraternizing, and making or breaking formal alliances. Each unit could combine two actions per turn and teams were given blank maps to draw the routes their units would travel, where barricades should be constructed, and other relevant details.

Teams were also provided with tables of the odds certain actions would be successful, depending on the types of units facing each other and their available defenses. For example, fraternizing protestors had a 17% chance per turn of converting military units to their cause, in which case they gained control over an armed unit. Alternatively, attacking riot police would prevail 67% of the time when facing protestors but those odds dropped down to 17% if the protestors had built barricades. Army units attacking riot police had an 83% chance of victory while revolutionary guards attacking the army only had a 50% chance of success. These are just a few examples and the probabilities can be adjusted to tweak the relative strength of different

groups, which can alter team strategies and provide an opportunity to reflect on how the domestic balance of power in these situations partially shapes outcomes.

When all teams had submitted orders, we resolved them sequentially beginning with the pro-democracy opposition, followed by the religious opposition, then the government, and finally the army. The luck of the dice were used to determine outcomes, with the instigating team rolling. We also publicly updated the position, movement, and state of all units on a large projected, interactive map at the front of the classroom.

Debrief

Debriefing constitutes a critical component of effective simulations. Through explicit discussion of their experiences, students can analytically draw connections with course content, deepening their understanding of important theories and concepts. It also provides an opportunity for the entire class to gain a broader perspective on what happened and why, by sharing their internal team deliberations and motivations (Newman and Twigg 2000; Smith and Boyer 1996; Wedig 2010). We thus devoted a substantial proportion of the seminar following the simulation, approximately one hour, to a comprehensive debrief.

We began by asking teams, in turn, to discuss what transpired from their perspective. This facilitated a basic recap of the simulation and jogged memories (which was important as, to maximize simulation time, we had waited a week until the debrief). Even though the teams had a week to prepare, and had submitted written versions of their initial strategies, the simulation nonetheless began fairly chaotically and with a flurry of cross-team negotiations. Indeed, most teams soon realized that their initial plans were failing due to lack of cooperation by other actors.

They thus had to quickly improvise to a rapidly changing situation. After two hours of disappointments, back-stabbing, and power grabs, the simulation ended with a surprising negotiated pact between the government and the religious opposition. As the two teams collectively controlled a majority of power centers, they were able to enforce their vision on society. They had even drafted and signed a new constitution, which preserved the personalist dictatorship but with a more hard-line theocratic stance and an expanding role for religious leaders in governance.

We also asked students to discuss the dynamics both within and between their teams. Several important points emerged. First, even though the government prevailed in the end, they had felt outnumbered and insecure the whole time. This led them to desperately seek allies and attempt to negotiate with anyone who was willing to deal. Indeed, while their initial plan was to work primarily with the army, they quickly gave up on a hedging military (which had not necessarily turned against them) and approached the religious opposition. Second, fearing that fraternization would lead some of their units to defect, and ultimately to army-on-army battles, the military had originally intended to side with the pro-democracy opposition. Yet, after the democratic protestors blocked the entrance of an army unit into the city on the first round, the military decided they couldn't be trusted and scrapped their strategy. Personality conflicts also developed between one of the pro-democracy students and both the rest of their team and the military team, leading to fractured behavior and unkept promises.

Finally, we prompted students to reflect on how their experiences related to the assigned readings on military behavior during revolutions. Based on the insights above, they noted that the literature was heavily focused on structural dynamics, such as prior coup proofing, and neglected

issues of personality, leadership, trust, and contingency. They observed that a context of high stakes, high risk, and uncertainty over other actors' behavior (which must be magnified in a real world crisis), led them to shape their strategies around who they thought they could trust and work with. The government team also turned first to units they knew were the most loyal—the riot police and revolutionary guards whom we had given them complete control over—and showed great hesitancy in ordering the military to repress. Constructed as an independent actor, with its own corporate interests, all teams intuitively understood that the military could not necessarily be relied upon to side with the regime. We could then discuss what circumstances in the real world would make the military more or less independent from the regime, and thus how their behavior might differ across revolutionary contexts.

Conclusion

This simulation enhances students' understanding of the complex dynamics of an authoritarian regime facing down mass protests, and how the military might behave in those circumstances. While we incorporated it into a class on civil-military relations, it could also be used to explore the broader dynamics of civil-resistance, revolutions, and democratization. The simulation could also be expanded to accommodate larger classes by adding additional teams, such as paramilitary units or more protestor groups. Moving forward, we would like to further enhance learning outcomes by adding a short, reflective essay between the simulation and the debrief. This would allow students to individually internalize what they have learned, before the debrief and closer to the end of the simulation, and to bring even more insights to the group discussion.

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