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# The Political Economy of Death Squads: Toward a Theory of the Impact of State-Sanctioned Terror

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A central theoretical question in the literature on state-sanctioned terror is whether, and under what conditions, repressive violence deters or stimulates a shift in popular support away from the regime and toward the opposition. By combining a rational choice model of the nonelite response to escalating levels of death squad violence with a structural analysis of the global and domestic conditions under which the escalation of state-sanctioned terror can be expected, we demonstrate theoretically that carefully targeted repressive violence may in fact reduce the level of active popular support for the opposition, at least temporarily. However, as the level of repressive violence escalates and its application becomes more indiscriminate, it may in fact produce increases in active support for the opposition because nonelites can no longer assure themselves of immunity from repression by simply remaining politically inert. Thus, they turn to the rebels in search of protection from indiscriminate violence by the state. Why, then, would a regime, itself composed of supposedly rational individuals, pursue a policy of escalating repression if such measures are ultimately counterproductive? We argue that the conditions of structural dependence characterizing these regimes leave them without the institutional machinery, economic resources, or political will to address opposition challenges through more accommodative programs of reform. Thus, escalating repression is perpetrated not because it has a high probability of success but because the weakness of the state precludes its resort to less violent alternatives. The utility of this approach is illustrated with a case study of reform, repression, and revolution in El Salvador.

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Although the term “death squad” has entered the lexicon of public discourse on political violence in the Third World, this phenomenon has only recently become the subject of systematic analysis in the social sciences. No doubt this omission has been due in part to the politically charged nature of the subject, exemplified by the heated debates over proper U.S. policy toward regimes that use death squads and other forms of repression as instruments of control. From an analytic perspective, inattention to state-sanctioned terror is symptomatic of the tendency among students of revolution to treat repressive violence as largely reactive in character, with the forms and levels of such violence being determined by the scope and intensity of the insurgent violence, and not vice versa.<sup>1</sup> Proactive or preemptive violence by the state seldom has been accorded independent analytical attention.

This tendency arises in part from what Denardo (1984:ch. 1) has termed the “spark and tinder” logic of most theories of revolution. According to this view, explaining revolution is a matter of accounting for those “underlying conditions” that render a society so volatile that one spark can ignite mass discontent into a revolutionary conflagration. Which precipitating event ignites the tinderbox is of less concern than how the society became so volatile in the first place, for when the underlying conditions are favorable it is highly probable that a revolution will occur. This logic underlies Davies’ (1962) “J-curve,” Skocpol’s (1979) and Johnson’s (1982) structural analyses of revolution, Paige’s (1975) theory of agrarian revolt, as well as most empirical analyses of civil violence, including Eckstein (1965), Bwy (1968), Gurr (1969), Feierabend and Feierabend (1972), and Hibbs (1973).

Yet, as both Scott (1985:29) and Denardo (1984:16–17) point out, mass revolts occur far less often than do those syndromes of “underlying conditions” which one or another theory of revolution has posited as being conducive to revolution. Scott (1985:xvi) adds that “it is rare for peasants to risk outright confrontation with authorities over taxes, cropping patterns, development policies, or onerous new laws.” Denardo (1984) argues that mass discontent will crystallize into active support for revolutionary violence only through the initiative of a dedicated revolutionary elite guided by a carefully formulated revolutionary strategy. It is our contention that, along with the organizational catalyst, what is required to convert normally risk-averse peasants into revolutionary soldiers is a high level of indiscriminately targeted repressive violence.

Using the logic of rational choice theory, we present a model of the decision calculus by which nonelites choose between supporting the regime, supporting the rebels, or remaining uninvolved. Following Scott’s (1985) image of peasant political behavior, we assume that nonelites caught in the crossfire between regime and rebels would prefer to remain uninvolved, devoting their efforts instead to the everyday tasks of securing subsistence. However, as the level of repressive violence escalates and becomes more indiscriminate, the option of remaining uninvolved is eventually precluded because nonelites can no longer assure themselves of immunity from repression by simply remaining politically inert. Under such conditions, they can be induced to support rebel organizations by the promise of protection from indiscriminate violence by the state.

This leads us to the question of why a regime, itself composed of supposedly rational individuals, would pursue a policy of escalating repression if such measures

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<sup>1</sup> Nardin (1971:64) has criticized theories of civil violence for treating the violence of opposition groups as a political problem and that of the state as conflict management. Gurr (1985a:2–3) points to a similar tendency among most empirical theories of civil violence. He notes that, for instance, Tilly’s (1978:ch. 4) theory of state coercion treats it as one among several responses (the others being toleration and facilitation) that a state can adopt when faced with challenges from groups seeking to improve their position; the implication here (among others) is that state coercion is reactive, not proactive.

are ultimately counterproductive. We argue that the conditions of structural dependence characterizing these regimes leaves them without the institutional machinery, economic resources, or political will to address opposition challenges through more accommodative programs of reform. Thus, escalating repression is perpetrated not because it has a high probability of success but because the weakness of the state precludes its resort to less violent alternatives. By combining a rational choice model of individual response to death squad violence with a structural dependence model of regime response to opposition challenges, we hope to explain the political economy of repression with more rigor and subtlety than either of these two research traditions—rational choice theory and dependency theory—can by itself. Certainly these two are seldom treated as readily complementary; therefore our approach is at least novel. We shall illustrate its utility with a case study of reform, repression, and revolution in El Salvador.

### **State-Sanctioned Terror in Comparative Perspective**

Over the last decade, a coherent body of scholarship on the sources, characteristics, and effects of state-sanctioned terror has begun to coalesce. A core of conceptual works have defined the range of actions included under the rubric of state-sanctioned terror (Sloan, 1984) by distinguishing it from “agitational terrorism” of opposition groups (Sloan, 1983), specifying characteristics of the state, the opposition, and the environment (domestic and international) that are conducive to “governance by terror” (Duvall and Stohl, 1983; Lopez, 1984; Gurr, 1985a, 1985b, 1986), and developing models of the decision calculus by which the state and the opposition choose between violent and nonviolent tactics in their struggle for political power (Lichbach, 1984, 1985a, 1985b, 1987). In the empirical realm, several scholars have explored the methodological issues inherent in the empirical analysis of state-sanctioned terror (Mitchell et al., 1986; Nicholson, 1986) and have documented empirical dimensions of state terror in the Third World (e.g., Wolpin, 1986), including its most extreme manifestations, genocide and politicide (Harff, 1986). Others have applied elements of these theories in analyses of the patterns, techniques, and impact of state terrorism in Argentina (Pion-Berlin, 1984), Brazil (Krane, 1983), Guatemala (Aguilera Peralta, 1980; Premo, 1981), Latin America generally (Sloan, 1984; Lopez, 1986), the Philippines (Zwick, 1984), and South Africa (Denemark and Lehman, 1984).

Within this body of research, there remains one rather conspicuous theoretical void. Most theoretical works have focused on the strategic behavior of rival elites in the regime and the opposition as they compete for popular support by supplying a variable mix of benefits and sanctions to nonelites (e.g., Leites and Wolf, 1970, Jackson et al., 1978; Denardo, 1984; and Lichbach, 1984, 1985a, 1985b, 1987). Missing in these analyses is any explicit attention to the ways in which differing mixes of benefits and sanctions affect the political preferences and behavioral choices of rural and urban nonelites. This would seem to be a crucial question since most of the victims of political violence are found among these nonelites, and their support and loyalty are what ultimately determine the outcome of the struggle between the regime and its opposition. By focusing on the individual caught in the crossfire between regime and rebels, we can integrate elements of a diverse array of theories (e.g., resource mobilization, structural dependency, demographic transition) in an effort to discern just what syndromes of social, economic, and political dynamics would induce an otherwise politically inert peasant (or urban nonelite) to risk violent death by taking up arms and joining a movement intent upon the overthrow of the incumbent regime. For these reasons, our analysis of death squad violence will use the decision calculus by which nonelites choose between supporting the regime, the

opposition, or neither as the common yardstick with which to assess the impact of varying levels of repressive violence and different syndromes of structural conditions on the extent of opposition support and level of opposition violence.<sup>2</sup>

The term "death squad" denotes those military, paramilitary, and irregular units that engage in violent acts against a population in order to deter them from lending support to opposition groups. "Death squad violence" is repressive violence intended to induce compliance through fear. It may be employed reactively or proactively. Its most critical distinguishing feature is that it is violence sanctioned by the regime, either explicitly through policy pronouncements or implicitly through lack of effort to curtail such acts. The extent to which the state sanctions such violence is reflected in the composition of the death squads and the patterns of their violence. They may consist of secret police, special counterinsurgency units, or regular units of the armed forces engaged in various forms of institutionalized violence. They may also consist of armed units structured along military lines but organizationally autonomous from state security forces, at least in a formal and legal sense. Among these are regional and local irregulars, mercenaries, private armies, and vigilante units engaged in noninstitutionalized violence in the service of local elites who share the government's desire to preserve the economic and political status quo (Aguilera Peralta, 1980:110; Lopez, 1984:63-64).

Death squads are most prevalent in societies where an authoritarian alliance between the military and a powerful economic elite is faced with a serious challenge to its legitimacy and authority. What the ruling elite fear most is an opposition movement that can mobilize the rural and urban poor behind efforts to redistribute political power and economic resources. Death squads and other agents of repression are instituted as means of suppressing such movements by eliminating their leaders and terrorizing their sympathizers into withholding support from opposition organizations (Jackson et al., 1978; Aguilera Peralta, 1980:110; Sloan, 1983; and Gurr, 1985a, 1985b, 1986).

The dominance of the military in the authoritarian state makes repression (as opposed to accommodation) the more likely response to mass opposition. Repression is the response for which the requisite institutional machinery (i.e., the military) is most highly developed. As Seligson (1987:4-5) notes, the military comes to see itself as the only institution capable of enforcing the political tranquility that is presumed (by the military and by local and foreign economic elites) to be a prerequisite for economic development. For many of these regimes, regular infusions of U.S. military equipment, training, and funding have served as constant reinforcements for this belief, making violent repression the almost reflexive response to mass political opposition.

Given this conceptualization of death squad violence, the central theoretical puzzle becomes that of sorting out the conditions under which such violence deters or, alternatively, stimulates nonelite support for the opposition. The evidence on this issue is by no means conclusive, as both theoretical and empirical arguments have been advanced for the stimulative (Eckstein, 1965; Gurr, 1969:579), deterrent (Snyder and Tilly, 1972:527; Hibbs, 1973:82-93; Tilly, 1978), and curvilinear (Bwy, 1968; Gurr, 1969, 1970; Feierabend and Feierabend, 1972; Muller, 1985; Seligson

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<sup>2</sup> The usual assumptions and caveats concerning rational choice theory hold here. We simply assume that actors will choose from among available alternatives that course of action (or inaction) which, to the best of their knowledge, most enhances their own well-being, however conceived. In choosing, they discount each alternative in accordance with some subjective estimate of the likelihood of that outcome and then choose the one with the greatest expected utility. In accordance with the revealed preference approach, there is no need to presume that nonelites actually make the calculations posited in the theory, only that they behave as if they did. Nor is there any presumption that individuals are concerned solely with money or other material commodities. See Popkin (1979:31) on these assumptions as they apply to the analysis of peasant behavior in Third World societies. We are well aware of the many critiques of rational choice theory. For a recent exchange, see Grafstein (1987) and Hadari (1987).

and Muller, 1987) effects of state-sanctioned terror on opposition support. In an effort to sort out these findings, we turn now to a rational choice analysis of the impact of escalating repressive violence on the political support of individual nonelites.

### Targets of Death Squad Violence

From a rational choice perspective, nonelite response to death squad violence can be represented as the rational individual's choice between supporting the government, its opposition, or neither. Rival elites compete for the support and loyalty of citizens by providing them with benefits (both private and collective in nature) in return for acts of support, and by threatening them with sanctions (including violence) for supporting the other elite group (Leites and Wolf, 1970). The political choice facing a nonelite can be represented as the difference in the individual's expected utility from supporting, respectively, the government, the opposition, or neither (Mason, 1986b). Under conditions of violent civil conflict, the critical element in this decision calculus should be the threat of sanctions by the regime and/or the rebels. First, part of the benefits offered by each of the rival elites consists of nonexcludable public goods that, as such, are subject to free rider effects (Olson, 1965; Tullock, 1971). Second, whatever excludable private benefits one elite group may provide will rarely if ever be sufficient to offset the risk of violent reprisals at the hands of the rival elite. Thus, neither collective benefits nor private rewards can offset the risk of death squad violence, and we are left with the threat of violent sanctions as the major determinant of nonelites' willingness to support the rebels, the regime, or neither.

The impact of death squad violence on the distribution of popular support between regime and opposition will vary depending upon the targeting strategy adopted by the regime. The regime may target its violence against (1) leaders of opposition organizations, (2) the rank and file members and supporters of those organizations, or (3) randomly selected groups of the mass public who have little or no demonstrable affiliation with the opposition (see figure 1.)

		Opposition Leaders	Rank and File Supporters	Politically Inactive
TARGETS OF DEATH SQUAD VIOLENCE	Opposition Leaders	Withdraw or "Go Underground" and Shift to Violent Tactics (Terrorism?)	Withdraw (Free Ride?) or Provide Covert Support or "Go Underground" and Participate in Violent Opposition	Remain Inactive (Free Ride)
	Rank and File Supporters	Shift Emphasis from Terrorism to Insurgency	Flee the Country or Join Insurgent Opposition	Provide Covert Support to Opposition or Remain Inert
	Random Targeting	Insurgency and Conventional Tactics	Continue as Insurgents	Flee the Country or Join Insurgent Opposition

FIG. 1. Participation in opposition activities.

*Opposition Leaders*

The most restrictive targeting strategy is one confined to the leadership of opposition organizations. Usually, this is the earliest and most common form of death squad violence to occur, and it appears before the political struggle has escalated to an intractable civil war.<sup>3</sup> Death squad violence directed against opposition leaders will reduce nonelites' willingness to engage in active support of the opposition. However, it does so not by inducing the fear that they may become victims themselves but by reducing their estimate of the opposition's ability to translate individual support into private or collective benefits. Although the free rider effect (Olson, 1965) would imply that rational individuals will not contribute to the provision of collective goods unless coerced or promised private benefits, Frohlich and Oppenheimer (1970), Frohlich, Oppenheimer, and Young (1971), Chamberlin (1974), and others have shown that when the public benefits in question are inclusive public goods (i.e., one person's consumption of them does not reduce the amount available for others), individuals can be induced to contribute their provision *even in the absence of selective incentives*. However, when opposition leaders are eliminated by death squads, nonelites begin to doubt whether opposition organizations can deliver collective benefits. Hence, the level of active support for the opposition should diminish, more because it has become futile rather than because it is dangerous. The level of *latent* support for the opposition should rise, however, as the loss of benefits from the opposition is not likely to be offset by a comparable increase in benefits from the regime. The level of latent support may be conceived of as those individuals who, given a choice, would prefer the opposition and its programs to those of the current regime but who, for fear of the consequences, are unwilling to express those preferences with overt support behavior.

*Rank and File Supporters of the Opposition*

The repression of opposition leadership seldom spells an end to political opposition because the grievances that gave rise to their demands in the first place are not resolved by repression. Instead, the repression of nonviolent forms of opposition (e.g., demonstrations, strikes, and electoral politics) will simply induce the new opposition leaders to adopt violent tactics of their own (Lichbach, 1987). The choice of tactics at this point will be influenced by a number of concerns. First, the new leaders will avoid actions which leave them exposed to the current repressive practices of the state. Second, they must choose tactics of their own that have some promise of overcoming free rider effects induced by the initial targeting of opposition leaders. Programs that mobilize a different segment of the population (e.g., peasants as opposed to factory workers), or that have lower expected costs of participation (e.g., mass demonstrations as opposed to strikes confined to known union members) may be adopted.

If the new opposition leaders succeed in restoring a significant level of anti-government activity, the regime may respond by expanding the range of death squad targets to include rank-and-file members of opposition organizations as well as participants in specific opposition activities. This escalation should have two different effects on different segments of the targeted population. First, known members of opposition organizations will not necessarily be intimidated into refraining from

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<sup>3</sup> The regime also has at its disposal a number of repressive techniques short of death squad violence. It can issue decrees or other quasi-legal measures to impede the operation of these organizations. It can imprison, detain, or exile the leadership. It can restrict their right to engage in certain political activities. Krane (1983:56-57) provides evidence of this phenomenon in Brazil. Aguilera Peralta (1980) and Premo (1981) discuss the use and effects of these and other repressive actions in Guatemala.

further anti-government activity. They must assume that, as known members of the opposition, they remain probable targets of repression. Therefore, they have little to lose by continuing to challenge the regime, though for obvious reasons they can be expected to resort to more covert and perhaps violent tactics, such as guerrilla warfare (Lopez, 1984; Sloan, 1984; Lichbach, 1987). By contrast, violence against occasional participants in opposition activities should intimidate the heretofore uninvolved into remaining so. To join or support the opposition overtly now is to risk victimization at the hands of the death squads. Thus, if the regime can confine its targeting to known members and occasional supporters of opposition organizations, it may temporarily preempt any expansion in the base of overt support for the opposition. *Latent* support for the opposition should continue to increase, however, in that compliance through fear cannot be equated with positive support. Should the opposition later demonstrate the ability to secure people against the risk of violent reprisals, it may be able to mobilize this pool of latent supporters.

### *The Politically Uninvolved*

If the targeting of nonelite participants in opposition activities results in a shift to insurgent violence on the part of the opposition, the regime may further escalate the application of repressive violence. Selecting the targets with little if any previous involvement in anti-government activities is intended to induce the fear among the uninvolved that, if they do offer aid to the insurgents, they risk reprisals by the death squads. For such violence to achieve this effect, however, it must be targeted in such a way that one need not fear coercive sanctions so long as one withholds support from the insurgents. The difficulty in targeting death squad violence so precisely is the problem of distinguishing the guerrilla irregular from the politically inert peasant. As death squads become more arbitrary in their application of violence, the regime risks the possibility of converting previously indifferent peasants into active supporters of the insurgents.<sup>4</sup> Simply refraining from supporting the insurgents will no longer exempt one from death squad violence.<sup>5</sup>

Under these circumstances, the insurgents need only offer an individual the means to avoid state-sanctioned terror to win his or her support. Insurgents may provide armed protection or the sanctuary of secure base areas. They may also target those peasants who serve as informants for the death squads. With their informants silenced, the death squads may become even more indiscriminate in their targeting, imposing a greater risk on all nonelites and rendering those who would otherwise remain uninvolved even more susceptible to rebel appeals that promise sanctuary from repressive violence. In this manner, indiscriminate repressive violence ceases to deter and, indeed, stimulates a shift in nonelite support to the insurgents.

### **Rural Social Change and the Escalation of Death Squad Violence**

Our analysis of the effects of different targeting strategies leads us to the question of why a regime would choose to escalate the level of repressive violence if at some point this strategy actually stimulates a shift in popular support to the insurgents. We

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<sup>4</sup> Any shift in peasant loyalty from the regime to the insurgents is a gradual process, constrained by the risk aversiveness of individuals living on the margins of subsistence. Migdal (1974:226–56) discusses the levels of peasant support for insurgent organizations and the conditions that contribute to increasing levels of such support.

<sup>5</sup> Frohlich and Oppenheimer (1973, 1974) present a formal treatment of this logic as it applies to the decision to pay or evade taxes. Mason (1986b, 1987) has applied these theoretical constructs in a formal analysis of, first, nonelite response to state-sanctioned terror and, second, competing strategies of insurgency and counterinsurgency.



would argue that the economic and demographic transformations that accompany dependent modes of development erode the already marginal economic security of nonelite households, rendering them more vulnerable to subsistence crises and therefore more susceptible to mobilization appeals of opposition organizations. These same conditions of structural dependency also constrain the ability of the state to pursue accommodative alternatives to the escalation of repression.<sup>6</sup>

Many Third World nations were first integrated into the global trade regime as producers of agricultural commodities for export to the metropolitan North. The shift to export agriculture transformed land use and land tenure patterns in these nations, disrupting traditional patron-client networks and leaving peasants exposed to fluctuations in local markets for land, labor, and subsistence goods.<sup>7</sup> In response to expanding export markets, landlords act to consolidate land holdings into larger commercial estates devoted to the production of profitable export crops. As a consequence, both the numbers and proportions of the rural population existing as landless wage laborers increase dramatically, disrupting the diffuse ties to local patrons that traditionally afforded peasants some margin of economic security (Migdal, 1974:229–31; Mason, 1986a:492–95).

The eroding economic plight of displaced peasants is further compounded by rapid population growth in the countryside.<sup>8</sup> Population growth combines with the consolidation of land holdings to raise the effective price of tenant plots and to depress agricultural wages (Harris and Samaraweera, 1984:141–42). Concomitantly, the market price of subsistence goods rises as the growth of the landless population raises demands for subsistence goods, while the displacement of food crops by export crops reduces local supplies (Durham, 1979:30–36).

Faced with these conditions, the displaced peasant has three choices: (1) accept the status quo and obtain subsistence through whatever means are immediately available, (2) attempt through collective action to force an increase in wages or access to land, or (3) migrate to other regions where unused lands, better wages, or occupational alternatives to agriculture are available (Scott, 1972:93–94). However, with the value of land and the size of the landless population both increasing, there is not likely to be much unused land available. The concentration of export production in one or two major crops ensures that the terms of trade between landlords and peasants in different regions of the nation will become uniform. Those who profit from export agriculture do not often invest their profits locally in new job-producing enterprises. Instead, they prefer increases in consumption or safer, more lucrative investments in the metropolitan North. Even if landowners were to invest locally, it is doubtful that the rate of job creation would be sufficient to absorb the expansion in the labor force that is typical of dependent Third World societies. Gendell (1986:64–65) estimates that an average annual growth in GDP of 8 percent would be required to absorb the growth in Latin America's labor force that is projected to occur between 1975 and 2000. Thus, the very conditions that render the peasant's immediate economic plight untenable also serve to foreclose the major "escape valves." Large numbers of peasants are compelled to migrate to urban barrios where they sustain a marginal existence in the informal and service sectors of the economy (Walton, 1984).

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<sup>6</sup> Among the major works on dependency theory are Frank (1972), Cardoso (1973, 1977), O'Donnell (1973), Cardoso and Faletto (1979).

<sup>7</sup> A number of works have analyzed these changes as the erosion of traditional patron-client networks. Among them are Migdal (1974), Paige (1975), Scott (1975), Kerkvliet (1977), Scott and Kerkvliet (1977), Popkin (1979), Mason (1986a).

<sup>8</sup> Migdal (1974:92–103), Scott and Kerkvliet (1977), Durham (1979), Harris and Samaraweera (1984), and Mason (1986c) have discussed the impact of population growth on the economic plight of peasants.

In the absence of state action to remedy their economic distress, nonelites turn to alternative institutions in search of some form of relief. Among these are grass roots organizations of various sorts, including traditional communal organizations, peasant cooperatives, and (in the case of Latin America) the Catholic Church.<sup>9</sup> Through these mechanisms, the poor begin organizing for the purpose of providing themselves with relief from the conditions of poverty and impotence. Participation is concentrated initially in less explicitly political activities such as setting up health and hygiene programs, child care cooperatives, literacy programs, clinics, and food distribution networks. Such programs address the immediate economic needs of the displaced and are less risky than more explicitly political activities (Chaffee, 1979).<sup>10</sup>

As nonelites experience some measure of success in cooperating for economic self-help, grass-roots organizations begin expanding their activities to include mobilization for policy change and reform. Popular organizations serve as links between previously disenfranchised nonelites and more traditional opposition organizations such as labor unions and political parties. Thus the uninformed are mobilized for political action not directly by opposition parties themselves but indirectly through the parties' ties to emerging grass-roots organizations.

Faced with an expansion in the opposition's base of mass support, the regime has two broad strategies to choose from in its effort to preempt a successful challenge to its authority. It can increase its reliance on coercion in an effort to intimidate nonelites into withholding active support from the opposition; or it can attempt through reforms to accommodate at least minimally the demands of economically marginalized nonelites. The particular mix of coercion and accommodation that the regime adopts will depend upon the resources at its disposal and the difference in the expected payoffs (in terms of political stability) from investing marginal resources in coercion versus accommodation (Lichbach, 1984).

However, the character of the authoritarian alliance between the military, the economic oligarchy, and their external supporters makes such regimes generally resistant to reforms that would redistribute wealth or political power at the expense of this alliance.<sup>11</sup> The highly skewed distribution of land, wealth, and income and the high rates of unemployment and underemployment typical of dependent societies limit the tax base from which the state can extract the resources needed to finance reforms. If the state attempts to shift the costs of reform onto the economic elite, they in turn can threaten to liquidate their assets and emigrate, or they can activate their ties with the military (through a coup if necessary) to preempt redistributive reforms. External financial assistance, whether from private banks, foreign governments, or international agencies such as the IMF, also reinforces the tendency

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<sup>9</sup> On the role of the Catholic Church and the doctrine of "Liberation Theology," see Lernoux (1980), and Montgomery (1982, 1983).

<sup>10</sup> In Central America, a further consequence of the dislocations described above has been the breakup of peasant families and an increase in the number of female-headed households, especially in urban barrios. Out of economic necessity, women have come to serve as the backbone of many of the grass-roots communal organizations. When these organizations become targets of government repression, women are not spared. Consequently, they too have been mobilized—independently of their spouses—for participation in Central American guerrilla movements as combatants and not just as support personnel. In Nicaragua, for instance, women constituted an estimated 30 percent of the Sandinista army and held positions as commanders of everything from small combat units to full battalions (Flynn, 1983). Women made up half of the membership of the grass-roots popular organizations that eventually came to serve as a support base for the FMLN in El Salvador (Montgomery, 1982). On the role of women in Central American revolutions, see Jaquette (1973), Ramirez-Horton (1982), Brewer (1983), Chinchilla (1983), and Mason (1986d).

<sup>11</sup> The characteristics of the authoritarian state are the subject of major works by Collier (1979) and O'Donnell (1973). Sloan (1984) and Gurr (1985a, 1985b, 1986) discuss its propensity for repressive rather than accommodative strategies.

toward repression. Such assistance is usually conditional upon the regime's adoption of conservative monetary and fiscal policies. Such measures intensify the economic hardships facing nonelites, which in turn fuel increased opposition activity. The regime reacts with further repression because to accede to opposition demands would be to violate IMF conditionality and thus jeopardize international sources of assistance (Pion-Berlin 1984:107–8). Foreign benefactors are usually willing to support repressive policies through generous grants of security assistance.

In short, the authoritarian regime lacks the institutional machinery, redistributable resources, and political inclination to pursue more accommodative strategies. Instead, regimes that have been successful in the past in suppressing opposition through violent repression are likely to resort to such tactics in the future, regardless of the character of the opposition organizations or their demands (Gurr, 1986:54–57). Coercion is the response for which the requisite institutional machinery (i.e., the security forces) is the most extensive and well-established in the authoritarian state. The ideology of the military is such that political tranquility is presumed to be a prerequisite for economic development. On this basis the military often comes to serve as the ultimate arbiter of political authority in the system (Pion-Berlin, 1984; Lopez, 1986; Seligson, 1987:4–5). Hence, the almost reflexive response to opposition challenges is to increase the level of officially sanctioned violence directed against the opposition leaders and their actual, suspected, or potential supporters.

However, the very forces that fuel growing opposition in the first place will in time erode the effectiveness of a strictly coercive strategy of control. Unrelieved poverty and continued population growth limit the coercive capacity of the regime in several ways. First of all, widening economic distress contributes to expanded nonelite involvement in grass-roots organizations. If the regime begins targeting the organized opposition, a greater proportion of the nonelite population will see themselves as potential victims of this repression because far more of them are involved in grass-roots organizations. Hence, more of them will choose to join an insurgent opposition—rather than do nothing—in search of some protection against state-sanctioned terror.

Second, high rates of population growth shift the age distribution in such a way that the number and proportion of young adults in the population increases dramatically (Gendell, 1986:52–59). In general, young adults are more willing to participate in political violence than are their older counterparts, and the probability of civil disorders in a locale is positively related to the number and proportion of disaffected young adults in the local population.<sup>12</sup> From a rational choice perspective, young adults are more willing to participate in civil violence because they have more to gain and less to lose than do their older counterparts. They have fewer assets to risk and fewer responsibilities to tie them down and prevent them from joining an insurgent organization. Furthermore, whatever costs young adults do risk will be discounted to present value over a longer remaining life span, and any collective benefits that might result from successful revolt will be compounded over a longer remaining life span. In short, the expected lifetime benefits are greater and the expected costs are less for young adults than for their elders. The shift in the age distribution of the population limits the coercive capacity of the regime by presenting

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<sup>12</sup> For instance, Miller, Bolce, and Halligan (1976) found that age was more strongly related to riot participation among American blacks than was any other demographic variable (i.e., income, occupation, education). Mason and Murtagh (1985) showed that age and gender distinguished riot participants from non-participants (with young males being most likely to riot). The disproportionate participation of youth in the events of 1968 in France, in anti-war protests in America, and in the disturbances of the Cultural Revolution in China indicate that the relationship between youth and political instability is not culture-bound or time-bound: the larger the young adult age cohort, the greater the probability of political disturbances (Kelly and Galle, 1984:107; see also Moller, 1968).

it with an expanding pool of potential insurgents that it must control through coercion. Identifying actual insurgents from among the large and growing population of potential insurgents becomes increasingly problematic, and death squad violence becomes less precisely targeted. Consequently, the risk of death from indiscriminate repression begins to approach or exceed the risk of death from participation in an insurgent organization.

Finally, the need for a constant increase in coercive capacity, combined with the limited financial resources at the disposal of the regime, implies that at some point the quality of the added security forces will begin to decline. The regime will be compelled to rely on ill-trained recruits and draftees, as well as paramilitary units, irregulars, and local death squads that are less subject to direct supervision and control by either the central military command or civilian political authorities. As raw trainees and paramilitary death squads are unleashed on the countryside, their blunt, arbitrary application of force will exacerbate the process by which the otherwise uninvolved turn to the insurgents for security from state-sanctioned terror. In this manner, the exclusive reliance on a coercive strategy will eventually contribute to, rather than retard, the growth in support for the insurgent opposition (Mason, 1987).

Eventually, the regime's financial resources will be strained by the cost of constantly expanding its coercive machinery. Fewer resources will remain for investment in what accommodative programs the state may be willing to undertake. The growing financial burden of coercive control will come to be felt by the very elites (domestic and foreign) in whose interests the state is attempting, through repression, to maintain the political and economic status quo. These pressures may at some point create strains within the authoritarian alliance itself, leading to a coup (as in Guatemala in 1973 and El Salvador in 1979), loss of the support of a significant segment of the economic or political elite (as in Brazil from the mid-1970s), or the exodus of that elite (as in Cuba in the late 1950s). Whatever the outcome the consequences for the regime's stability are potentially devastating, as evidenced by the fall of the Somoza dynasty in Nicaragua in 1979. In the following section, we shall apply the theoretical framework developed thus far to an analysis of the impact of death squad violence on regime stability in El Salvador.

### **El Salvador: The Political Economy of Repression, Reform, and Revolution**

The current crisis in El Salvador can be traced to the pattern of dependent development described earlier: severe land pressures catalyzed by a shift to export agriculture and the rapid growth of the rural population, the failure of an authoritarian regime to relieve these pressures through redistributive reforms or developmental initiatives, and the subsequent violent struggle between opposition and regime. These dynamics have shaped both the state's use of repressive violence and the nonelites' response to state-sanctioned terror.<sup>13</sup>

When independence was declared in 1839 the peasant population of El Salvador was distributed largely among four land tenure arrangements: (1) as *colonos* or permanent workers on large *haciendas*, (2) as smallholders or tenants on the surrounding *minifundia*, (3) as landless laborers and squatters, or (4) as residents of communal lands (*ejidos*). As long as total population remained relatively stable, the power of the landed elite over the peasantry was moderated by the fact that a plurality of the land was owned communally in the form of the *ejidos*. Those lands

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<sup>13</sup> Browning (1971) and Burns (1984) present detailed treatments of the impact of export agriculture on Salvadoran development. Analyses of recent events in the crisis include Baloyra (1982), Montgomery (1982), and Shulz (1984). Durham (1979) presents an especially rigorous analysis of the impact of economic change and population growth on political stability.

served as an escape valve of sorts: to the extent that disaffected peasants could be absorbed into the *ejidos*, intermittent land pressures and peasant discontent could be relieved by internal migration.

The opening of Pacific coast shipping in the 1870s made it possible for Salvadoran landowners to enter the booming coffee trade. The shift to coffee production provoked profound changes in the land tenure system that eventually eroded the traditional clientelist stability in the countryside of El Salvador. Because the lands best suited for coffee cultivation were in the *ejidos*, the Salvadoran state undertook the statutory abolition of communal ownership in the late 1800s in order to enable the plantation oligarchy ("the fourteen families") to acquire these lands and convert them to coffee production. This land redistribution displaced thousands of peasants and foreclosed the major mechanism for relief of periodic land pressures (Browning, 1971:ch. 5). Structural dislocations in the countryside were exacerbated by the expansion of total population from 554,000 in 1878 to 1,493,000 by 1931 (Browning, 1971:171). Thus, the traditional mechanisms by which land pressures had been relieved were either dismantled by the shifts in land use and land tenure or were overwhelmed by the accompanying demographic transition (Mason, 1986a:496–99; Burns, 1984:298–302). Eventually, these pressures erupted into the peasant revolt of 1932 which the state brutally suppressed by killing between ten and thirty thousand peasants in what has come to be known as "*la matanza*."<sup>14</sup>

*La matanza* marks the point at which an authoritarian alliance between the Salvadoran military and the landed elite turned to an almost exclusive reliance on coercion as a way of preempting further unrest in the countryside (Hoeffel, 1984:101, Shulz, 1984:194–98). However, coercion alone could not contain the momentum of further economic and demographic transformations that continued to erode the foundations of social stability. The introduction of additional export crops (e.g., cotton, cattle, sugar) in the post World-War II era raised the value of lands not suited for coffee production and thus contributed to further concentration of land ownership and displacement of peasant households. As the landless labor force grew, demand for agricultural labor declined because the production characteristics of the new crops did not require a large permanent labor force. Cotton production has been increasingly subject to mechanization, and cattle production has a high land-to-labor ratio. Furthermore, their production displaced food crops, reducing the local supply of subsistence goods (Durham, 1979; DeWalt, 1985). Food grain imports rose throughout most of the 1960s and 1970s and prices rose with them, as evidenced by the 182 percent increase in the consumer price index between 1970 and 1977 (Montgomery, 1982:29–30).

By 1975 almost 60 percent of the land was owned by only two percent of the population. By contrast, over 40 percent of the rural population had no access to land, and of those that did, 49 percent had less than one hectare and 94 percent had less than ten hectares (Shulz, 1984:191; see also Simon and Stephens, 1982:160–61, Montgomery, 1982:27–28; Graham, 1984:174–76). For the 40 percent of the population that was landless, wages provided only 52 percent of family income. For smallholders and tenants with less than two hectares of land, crops provided only one-third of household income (Brewer, 1983:400).

Rapid population growth accelerated the erosion of the nonelites' economic plight. Total population more than doubled between 1960 and 1982, and annual growth rates have remained between 2.5 and 3.5 percent. The dependency ratio has

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<sup>14</sup> Estimates of the number of people killed in *la matanza* vary widely. See Anderson (1971:135) for a discussion of the validity of the different estimates.

remained above 90 percent (the figure for the U.S. in 1980 was 51 percent).<sup>15</sup> Thus, local capital formation has been overwhelmed by growing consumption demands. By 1970, agricultural density (the ratio of population to arable land) had increased to 266.2 persons per square kilometer, the highest ratio in Latin America (Taylor and Jodice, 1983). Some 70 percent of the total land surface was already under cultivation (Shulz, 1984:191). Migration to Honduras, a traditional escape valve for land-poor Salvadorans, was foreclosed by the Soccer War of 1969 (Durham, 1979). Those who have access to land have overworked it to the point that soil depletion and erosion have become major problems. Those who lacked access to land have resorted to planting food crops in the most inhospitable of locales, including the slopes of active volcanoes. In the aggregate, these actions have contributed to serious deforestation and soil erosion problems (Shulz, 1984:191).

The Salvadoran state has lacked both the institutional capacity and the political volition to create occupational alternatives to agriculture. Industrial growth has never been sufficient to absorb those displaced by shifts in land use, and population growth has simply exacerbated this problem. Although manufacturing grew by 24 percent between 1961 and 1971, industrial employment grew by only six percent (Shulz, 1984:193). Between 1960 and 1982, the size of the working age population grew by 1.4 million, while industrial employment grew only from 230,000 to 600,000.<sup>16</sup> The one million new workers not absorbed by what is often characterized as the industrial "boom" of the 1960s were left to compete for a limited supply of low paying jobs in the agricultural and service sectors of the economy. Indeed, the proportion of the economically active population employed in industry actually declined from 13 percent in 1961 to only 10 percent in 1971 (Shulz, 1984:193). Thus, the demographic and economic transformations occurring in El Salvador since 1945 have left the majority of the peasantry devoid of any security against fluctuations in the deteriorating markets for land, labor, and subsistence goods.

In the absence of reforms by the state, nonelites increasingly have turned to a new generation of Catholic priests and lay workers who, inspired by the ideals of liberation theology, have begun mobilizing the poor in a network of mass-based organizations intended to provide relief from poverty and impotence. Initially, these grass-roots organizations addressed the immediate economic needs of the poor by providing services such as health and hygiene programs, child care cooperatives, food distribution networks, and literacy programs. By the 1970s, popular organizations had evolved into a mass support base for political opposition groups challenging the policies and eventually the legitimacy of the military-dominated regime (Lernoux, 1980; Montgomery, 1982:123–30).

As the level of opposition activity grew, the mass organizations (and especially their leaders) became the targets of an escalating campaign of violent repression perpetrated by government security forces and paramilitary organizations such as ORDEN (the Nationalist Democratic Organization), the UGB (*Union Guerrillera Blanca* or White Warrior's Union), the Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez Squad, *Mano Blanco* (the White Hand), and FALANGE (*Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Anticomunista* or Anti-Communist Armed Forces of Liberation). State-sanctioned terror was coupled with electoral fraud to overturn elections in 1972 and 1977 that would have brought to

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<sup>15</sup> The dependency ratio is defined as the combined population under 15 and over 64 years old as a percentage of the population between those ages.

<sup>16</sup> The figures on industrial employment are calculated using figures for 1960 and 1982 on total population size, percent of the population between 15 and 64, and percent of the workforce in industry. The data were taken from Taylor and Jodice (1983) and the World Bank's *World Development Report 1984*.

power reform-minded Christian Democratic governments. Instead, opposition leaders (including former President Jose Napoleon Duarte) were jailed or exiled.

Between 1972 and 1980 repression of the rank-and-file supporters of the opposition became more widespread and lethal. The National Guard killed fifty peasants and wounded two hundred others at La Cayetana in 1974 (Shulz, 1984:202). In 1975, participants in demonstrations protesting exorbitant government expenditures on the Miss Universe pageant held in San Salvador were gunned down by government troops. In February of 1978 hundreds were wounded or killed and thousands arrested or detained by the National Guard following a major demonstration protesting electoral fraud (Americas Watch, 1982:39). In 1979, twenty-one peasants were killed during a peaceful demonstration, and two months later another twenty were massacred in Coatepeque (Wheaton, 1980:8). In 1980, the largest demonstration in El Salvador's history—estimates run from 80,000 to 200,000 participants—was fired upon, leaving dozens dead and hundreds injured (Leiken, 1984:117).

With the escalating repression of legitimate groups, opposition organizations began adopting more militant and violent tactics of their own. The emergence of groups such as the Popular Revolutionary Bloc (BPR), the Unified Popular Action Front (FAPU), and the Popular Leagues of the 28th of February (LP-28) marked the opposition's shift to a strategy to topple the regime by revolutionary means.<sup>17</sup> In 1980, the Faribundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) and the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR) were formed as umbrella organizations uniting the fragmented insurgent groups into a coordinated revolutionary opposition pledged to remedying the economic distress of nonelites through the institution of democratic reforms, the redistribution of land, the creation of rural credit and marketing services, wage reforms, and industrial expansion.

Despite these promises, the willingness of nonelites to shift their loyalties to the FMLN-FDR has been constrained by the accompanying risk of lethal reprisals at the hands of the death squads. However, as the level of coercion has increased, its application has become grossly indiscriminate with respect to both the selection of targets and the amount of force used. Statistics compiled by the Archbishop's Legal Aid Office document that five to six persons a day were assassinated by death squads in the first half of 1979. The figure rose to nine to ten per day by the year's end (Wheaton, 1980:8).

We have argued that as repression becomes more pervasive and more arbitrary, its deterrent effect on opposition support should diminish because the likelihood of becoming a victim is no longer related to one's support or non-support of the insurgents. The growth of the FMLN's active forces and its base of covert support during the late 1970s suggests such a shift in peasant loyalties and its correlation with the escalation of indiscriminate repressive violence. By 1979, the FMLN had an estimated 6,000–8,000 active guerrillas, as many as 100,000 part-time militia, and a reported one million sympathizers who provided covert support in the form of food, intelligence, and sanctuary (Leiken, 1984:118).

Increasing civil violence heightened the long-standing conflict between the landed oligarchy and the military, on the one hand, and the nonrevolutionary opposition led by the Christian Democratic Party (PDC), on the other, over the efficacy of the state's exclusive reliance on repression as a strategy of control. By October 1979, the more

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<sup>17</sup> Other such organizations included the Popular Forces of Liberation (FPL) and its military arm, the Armed Forces of Popular Liberation (FAPL), the Armed Forces of Liberation (FAL) which is affiliated with the Salvadoran Communist Party (PCS), the Armed Forces of National Resistance (FARN), the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP), and others. The origin and composition of these and other insurgent organizations are discussed in Armstrong and Shenk (1982), Leiken (1984), Shulz (1984).

progressive elements of the Salvadoran military had come to the conclusion that accommodative reforms of some sort would be required to stop the further erosion of popular support. Hence, they staged a coup that installed a civilian-military junta pledged to institute reforms. Despite the defection of key civilians dissatisfied with the pace and scope of the reforms and the lack of civilian control over the security forces, a reconstituted junta announced a land reform program and a return to civilian rule under a new constitution to be written by a popularly elected Constituent Assembly.

The Salvadoran reform program of 1980 represents a shift in the regime's strategy for winning popular support from one based almost exclusively on coercion to one based more heavily on remedying the deteriorating economic plight of the rural and urban poor. The success of this strategy would depend, first of all, on the extent to which the announced reforms actually were implemented and, second, on the extent to which their provisions actually relieved the economic distress of displaced peasants. Most importantly, success would depend on the extent to which the civilian government could exert sufficient control over the security forces and their paramilitary counterparts to reduce the level and arbitrariness of repressive violence.<sup>18</sup>

The 1980 land reform was designed to proceed in three phases. Phase I would convert estates larger than 500 hectares into peasant cooperatives. Phase II would affect farms between 100 and 500 hectares. Phase III would transfer title of rented land to the current tenants, up to a limit of seven hectares per household. In each phase, former landowners would be compensated with a combination of cash and redeemable bonds (Browning, 1983; Simon and Stephens, 1982). Phase I was largely completed by the time of the 1982 Constituent Assembly elections, and Phase III's implementation had already begun. Phase II, which would have included most of the coffee acreage, was postponed indefinitely, reflecting the still-powerful influence of the coffee oligarchy.

The effectiveness of Phases I and III in restoring popular support was hampered by flaws in their design and implementation. Most significantly, only peasants who were already employed as permanent workers on the estates were allowed to enter Phase I cooperatives, and only peasants already renting land could apply for title under Phase III. Therefore, only about 100,000 people out of a population of five million received land under Phases I and III, and the landless population remained virtually untouched by the benefits of reform. Implementation of reform was hampered by the sheer volume of administrative work involved in the transfer of title on the estimated 100,000 parcels of land covered by Phase III. As a result, there were serious delays which allowed landlords time to evict peasants before they could obtain title to their land (Strasma et al., 1983:135-42). Many who qualified for land under Phase III were reluctant to apply for title because they were renting from relatives or from other peasants who owned small amounts of land scattered among several plots. The specific provisions of Phase II were not delineated until the December 1983 promulgation of the new constitution. The most important provision was that within three years, affected landowners must sell to peasants or peasant organizations all land in excess of 245 hectares or face expropriation of that land by the government without prior compensation. This ceiling would free 20,000-70,000 acres of land for

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<sup>18</sup> Of course, the success of the program also depended on a substantial infusion of U.S. economic and technical assistance (\$3.2 billion between 1980 and 1987). Likewise, the willingness and ability of the state to control the excesses of the security forces and death squads also depended in part on the willingness of the U.S. to manipulate its substantial infusion to military aid (some \$1 billion over the same time period) to that end. Whether U.S. aid has in fact had any instrumental impact on the human rights situation in El Salvador is certainly debatable. For a discussion of the amounts and forms of this aid and some of its effects, see Siegel and Hackel (1988:115-28).



redistribution, according to the U.S. State Department (1984:22). To date, the actual redistribution of land under Phase II has not proceeded very far, if at all.

The opponents of reform used the time between the announcement of the reforms and the election of the Constituent Assembly to escalate the level and arbitrariness of death squad violence. Phase I was implemented by a "state of siege" imposed on the estates by the military, ostensibly to enforce the implementation of the reforms but effectively to intimidate peasants into abandoning the cooperatives. During the reform's first year, death squads and security forces assassinated over 500 peasant leaders, dozens of officials with ISTA (the Salvadoran Institute of Agrarian Transformation, the agency charged with implementing Phase I), Catholic priests and lay catechists (including Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was gunned down while saying mass), land reform workers (including Rodolpho Viera, the head of ISTA, and two U.S. land reform advisors), as well as hundreds of members of peasant unions and cooperatives (Simon and Stephens, 1982; Wheaton, 1980). Similar violence reduced the effectiveness of Phase III's implementation. Because Phase III beneficiaries were isolated renters, they were more vulnerable to intimidation by local death squads. The administrative delays that characterized Phase III simply provided the oligarchy with ample time to short-circuit the program through the use of death squad violence. According to figures compiled by Socorro Juridico, 12,501 "extralegal killings of civilians not engaged in armed combat" occurred during 1981, the year in which Phases I and III were being implemented. Over 5,000 of these victims were identified as *campesinos* (Simon and Stephens, 1982:61).

As the figures in Table 1 suggest, death squad violence became increasingly widespread and random as the struggle both within the regime and between the regime and the FMLN heightened in anticipation of the 1982 elections. In one incident, hundreds of unarmed peasants including women, children, and elderly people were massacred as they attempted to flee across the Sumpul River into Honduras (Blundy, 1983). In December, some nine hundred civilians, including women and children, were taken from their homes and executed by government troops during a sweep through the Morazan province (Shulz, 1984:230). As a priest in the Catholic Church's Legal Aid Office put it, "to be a victim . . . it is enough to be a relative of a militant or to be suspected of having collaborated with the insurgents. The concept of collective responsibility is being progressively extended to the individual, the family, town, and even province" (quoted in Shulz, 1984:214).

The ultimate outcome of this struggle within the regime and between it and the FMLN is, of course, yet to be determined. There is some evidence, however, that since the reforms were effectively ratified in the elections of 1982 and 1984, the new civilian leadership has been able to make limited progress in reversing the shift of popular

TABLE 1. Deaths from repression and counterinsurgency in El Salvador, 1983–1986.

	1983	1984	1985	1986
Targeted Victims of Death Squads/Military	1,259	224	240	123
Civilian Noncombatant Victims of Counterinsurgency Operations	3,625	2,657	1,416	830
Disappeared	535	195	81	39
TOTAL	5,419	3,076	1,737	992

Sources: Americas Watch (1984, 1985a, 1985b, 1987).

support to the FMLN. In the 1982 Constituent Assembly elections, the PDC gained a plurality of seats but was denied the presidency by a coalition of right-wing parties. However, the 1984 elections brought PDC leader Jose Napoleon Duarte to power.

Crucial to the PDC's success in restoring a base of popular support to the troubled regime has been the government's ability to reduce (though by no means eliminate) death squad violence. Indeed, the elections themselves, despite their flaws, have been characterized not so much as referenda on land reform as votes for an end to violence. The level of repressive violence, though still brutally high, showed a steady decline between the 1982 and 1984 elections. In 1983, there were 1,259 documented killings by the death squads, 3,625 civilian noncombatants killed by the military, and another 535 counted among the "disappeared." Although these figures represent a substantial decline from the 12,000 killed in 1981, they also indicate the inability (or unwillingness) of the Constituent Assembly to exert effective control over the agents of repression. In 1984, death squad murders declined to 185 in the first six months and to 39 in the six months following Duarte's election. "Disappearances" declined as well in each half of 1984 to 139 and 56 respectively. The killing of civilian noncombatants by the security forces, though declining, remained abominably high at 2,657 for 1984 (Americas Watch, 1984, 1985a, 1985b). These trends continued downward under Duarte's administration. In 1985, death squad murders declined to 240, disappearances to 81, and civilian combat deaths to 1,416 (Americas Watch, 1986:2); in 1986, the figures were 123, 39, and 830, respectively (Americas Watch, 1987:7).

The total of 950+ deaths at the hands of the regime in 1986 represent an improvement only in comparison to the bloodbath of 1979–1983. There is no evidence of a dramatic decline in the number of full-time guerrillas, nor should we expect there to be since, in the absence of a credible amnesty program, active guerrilla fighters can expect death after surrender.<sup>19</sup> By the same token, there is no evidence of a significant growth in the rebel forces. The decline in the level and arbitrariness of repression, coupled with the limited but positive effects of the reform program, may well have reduced the level of covert support for the FMLN as well. Though the Reagan administration liked to attribute these developments to more effective counterinsurgency tactics, it is our contention, based on the theory presented here, that the explanation lies elsewhere.

First, the land reform program, despite its limitations, has co-opted a large number of direct beneficiaries from participation in insurgency. More than likely, the promise of further reforms has made other nonelites less willing to lend support to the rebels. For them, the political choice is now between some chance of reform benefits *with reduced risks of violence* so long as the PDC remains in power versus a more remote chance of reform benefits from an FMLN victory—and those coming only after a protracted and bloody civil war. Second, the FMLN's own tactics of disrupting the economy have apparently alienated a large number of peasants (Leiken, 1984) and made them more susceptible to the promise of peaceful reform by the PDC. Most important, the decline in nonelite support for the FMLN can be attributed to the dramatic decline in the level and arbitrariness of death squad violence. As repression has become less pervasive and arbitrary, the option of remaining uninvolved in the conflict has been restored.

The largest block of victims since 1984 has been noncombatant victims of counterinsurgency operations by the Salvadoran military, not of death squad

<sup>19</sup> The Arias Central American Peace Plan contained amnesty provisions. However, the Salvadoran Assembly enacted a law that granted amnesty not just for rebels but for anyone who committed a crime "in connection with" the conflict before October 22, 1987. Thus, the members of the military and the death squads who are responsible for some 44,000 non-combat-related civilian deaths over the course of that last decade were granted amnesty along with any rebels willing to lay down their arms. While several exiled politicians have returned to participate in the 1988 elections, few if any rebels have participated in the amnesty program (America's Watch, 1988:2–5).

violence. This development is attributable to the government's shift to tactics that rely on air strikes and the designation of free-fire zones in regions of heavy rebel activity (Americas Watch, 1984, 1985a; Lawyers Committee for International Human Rights, 1984). In these circumstances, a rational strategy for a war-weary nonelite would be to withhold any covert or overt support for the guerrillas because any actions that marginally increase the level of guerrilla activity in an area also increase the likelihood of local counterinsurgency operations by the military. Given current tactics of the Salvadoran military, life in regions of heavy counterinsurgency activity is extremely dangerous, to say the least. A nonelite would have a strong incentive either to migrate or to join the rebels. The growth in the population of El Salvador's internal refugee camps (Americas Watch, 1985a; Lawyer's Committee for International Human Rights, 1984) and the continued high incidence of civilian battle deaths are testimony to these effects in the Salvadoran countryside.<sup>20</sup>

While the substitution of official counterinsurgency operations for indiscriminate death squad violence may have stemmed the erosion of the government's stability, it has by no means increased the level of active support for the regime. Because counterinsurgency violence is more predictable than death squad violence, there are measures that nonelites can take to avoid becoming victims. In this respect, substituting counterinsurgency operations for death squad violence probably has reduced the level of covert support for the FMLN. However, it does so by converting the civilian population of the affected region into either refugees who are forcibly relocated or active rebel supporters who stay behind. In a free-fire zone, no other choices exist. Those who are torn from their home for relocation in a refugee camp can hardly be counted upon as active supporters of the regime, any more than can landlords whose property was expropriated—with compensation—in the land reform program. Refugees who left friends or family behind would also have some incentive to provide whatever covert support they could to the rebels. In the absence of any political efforts (such as an amnesty program) that would induce rebels to lay down their arms, the government is faced with the prospect of a protracted and costly military stalemate with an insurgent army that has nothing to lose by continuing the battle.

## CONCLUSION

A central theoretical question in the literature on state-sanctioned terror is whether, and under what conditions, repressive violence deters or induces a shift in popular support away from the regime and toward the opposition. What is perhaps unique about this analysis is that we have approached this question by combining a rational choice model of the nonelite response to escalating levels of death squad violence with a structural analysis of the global and domestic conditions under which the escalation of state-sanctioned terror can be expected. In particular, we have described the ways in which variations in the targeting of such violence affect the tide of popular support in societies torn by civil violence and repression. Of significance is the argument that carefully targeted repressive violence may reduce the level of active popular support for the opposition, while widespread indiscriminate violence may in fact produce increases in active support for the opposition.

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<sup>20</sup> The FMLN's reaction to the escalation of the war by the military has been to break its forces into small units of eight to twelve persons that are less vulnerable to detection and attack by the military. The increased use of air strikes in FMLN zones of control has led the FMLN to expand the war geographically by dispersing these units throughout the country and shifting to a greater reliance on hit-and-run attacks as opposed to battlefield confrontations. However, highly centralized leadership still allows the FMLN to reconcentrate forces for large-scale attacks, such as the raids on military facilities in La Unión (October, 1985), San Miguel (June, 1986), and El Paraisón (April, 1987). See Siegel and Hackel (1988).

However, even carefully targeted repression does not redress the grievances that gave rise to opposition in the first place; it simply terrorizes nonelites into not acting overtly to seek redress of those grievances. This raises a question that needs to be addressed in future efforts to elaborate more precisely the formal elements of this theory. Specifically, our analysis implies that carefully targeted repression may deter nonelite *behaviors* that support the opposition, but it does not shift nonelite *preferences* in favor of the regime. Quite the contrary, nonelite preferences should shift in favor of the opposition, even though their willingness to express them with overt acts of support may be deterred by repression. This distinction between preferences and supportive behaviors, expressed eloquently by Christopher Dickey (1984) in the phrase "*obedezco pero no cumpro*" ("I obey but I do not comply"), was raised by Leites and Wolf (1970), but its theoretical implications were never sufficiently explored because of their near-exclusive concern with competing *elite* strategies of insurgency and counterinsurgency. By assessing the behavioral calculus of individual nonelites, we have begun to lay the theoretical groundwork for a more refined model of the ways in which repression affects the preferences and behaviors of individual nonelites and, therefore, the aggregate level of popular support for the regime (cf. Mason, 1986b; 1987).

This distinction contains certain implications for policy makers as well. In particular, U.S. policy toward insurgencies has consistently treated them as military problems whose resolution is simply a matter of implementing the appropriate counterinsurgency tactics. The fact that current policy debates over "low intensity conflict" seem to focus more on questions of force structure and use doctrine is indicative of this tendency (see Klare and Kornbluh, 1988). While conventional counterinsurgency tactics may stem the growth in active support for the rebels, they do nothing to reduce the incentives for those already marked as rebels or rebel supporters to continue the battle. Protracted low-intensity warfare is a burden that the war-weary populations and fragile economies of Third World nations can ill afford to bear. Our analysis suggests that, ultimately, non-military initiatives such as negotiated cease-fires and amnesty programs designed to integrate an insurgent opposition back into the mainstream of conventional politics may be the only way to bring an insurgency to a peaceful conclusion. In the absence of any credible assurances against violent reprisals, rebels have nothing to lose by continuing their own program of violent opposition.

Our analysis also suggests that structural reform in the local economy is essential to the long-term stability of any regime in these nations. Where non-military options such as land reform have been tried, the assumptions underlying their design and implementation often have been equally simplistic. The idea behind such U.S.-backed policies in Vietnam and El Salvador was that "land to the tiller" programs would "win the hearts and minds" of rural populations by giving them a stake in the status quo (Prosterman, 1981). However, such programs ignore the marginal economic existence of the newly created peasant smallholder and, by themselves, do not reduce his or her vulnerability to either the economic risks of agriculture or the political risks of death squad violence. Any land reform program that does nothing to reduce the economic marginality of beneficiaries or to create occupational alternatives to agriculture for non-beneficiaries has little hope of remedying the underlying structural sources of instability. Moreover, economic reforms that do nothing to reduce the threat of repressive violence are unlikely to succeed, because unchecked repression by foes of reform within the regime can undermine the success of land reform by intimidating potential beneficiaries into abandoning their right to claim title to land.

In principle, the propositions presented in this article can be tested empirically (e.g., by testing the pattern of relationships between land reform, death squad

activity, and the level of support for the regime in El Salvador; see Mason, 1986a). The analysis presented here has contributed to that broader effort by elaborating more fully the theoretical link between repression and nonelite support for the regime. Much work remains to be done before our understanding of the politics of repression even approaches the state of knowledge on the dynamics of revolution. This study has focused analytical attention on nonelite response to repressive violence, because the effects of repression can never be fully understood until we explore the ways in which the calculus of fear determines nonelite response to different levels of repressive violence under different sets of structural conditions.

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