

Sanctuaries or Battlegrounds? State Penetration in Places of Worship, University Campuses, and State Bureaucracy for Pro-Government Mobilization: Evidence from Iran (2015–2019)

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Abstract

What factors shape different levels of pro-government mobilization in authoritarian regimes? The existing literature has considered the threat of anti-regime protests as the primary driver of pro-government mobilization. While we confirm this finding in the literature, we argue that the regime's organizational infrastructure significantly contributes to pro-regime mobilization. We identify places of worship, university campuses, and state bureaucracy as three main sites where states could extend their organizations for pro-government mobilization. Previous scholarship has considered universities and places of worship as free spaces for oppositional activities, but we argue

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that states might try to penetrate these sectors to extend their organizational reach. The statistical analyses of our original data on pro-government mobilization in Iran from 2015 to 2019 at the district level ($n = 429$) provide robust support for this argument.

Keywords

pro-regime mobilization, organizations, authoritarianism, Middle East, Iran

Introduction

After a U.S. air **drone** assassinated Qassem Soleimani on January 3, 2020 in Iraq, multiple cities in Iran held funerals for him, and mourners filled the streets. His funeral in Tehran attracted an estimated 5 million people, surpassing the funeral attendance for Ruhollah Khomeini, the founding father of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Economist, 2020). International viewers were shocked to see such an impressive turnout, but it is important to note that this event was organized and coordinated by state organizations in Iran. According to Hellmeier and Weidmann (2020), Iran has been among the states with the highest rates of pro-government mobilization in the world for the period of 2003–2015. The deadly airstrike served as an occasion where the state relied on its experience, organizations, and networks to convey its message of seeking revenge and suppressing critics through patriotic sentiments generated by Qassim Soleimani's dramatic assassination. During the revolution of 1979, revolutionaries used funerals as a tactic to protest the monarchy's violence against protesters. With the fall of the monarchy in Iran and the advent of the Islamists to state power, funerals remained a contentious tactic, but this time, they promoted state interests instead of challenging them.

Pro-government mobilization is not a new political phenomenon; however, studies on contentious collective action and social movements have predominantly focused on bottom-up mobilization rather than top-down instances. It is worth noting that various autocratic and, at times, democratic states have mobilized their supporters to advance their agendas and interests. Nevertheless, social scientists have recently shifted their focus to examine these instances of collective action (Ekiert et al., 2020; Hellmeier and Weidmann, 2020). This emerging literature argues that anti-government protests serve as the primary catalyst for pro-state mobilization, as states respond to perceived threats stemming from opposition-led street mobilization.

We draw on studies of social movement organizations (McAdam, 1982; Walker and Martin, 2018; Zald and McCarthy, 2017), top-down civil society (Gramsci, 1971; Riley and Fernández, 2015; Spires, 2011), and government-organized, non-governmental organizations (GONGOs)

([Hasmath et al., 2019](#); [Wu, 2003](#)), to argue that states do not merely respond to anti-government mobilization in an ad hoc manner, but build organizational and institutional infrastructure to support pro-government mobilization in times of unrest and instability.

Where do states establish the organizational basis for pro-government mobilization? We argue that states seek to increase their organizational and mobilizational capacity in social sectors where pre-existing social relations can serve as mobilizing structures for opposition groups. These social sectors, also called “indigenous organizations” or “free spaces,” offer opportunities for collective action and identity formation. Previous scholarship has demonstrated that places of worship and universities are indigenous organizations where opposition forces have challenged the government ([Dahlum and Wig, 2020](#); [Ketchley, 2017](#); [McAdam, 1982](#); [Morris, 1984](#)). We argue that authoritarian states also try to infiltrate and dominate those social sectors and use them for pro-government mobilization purposes in response to such challenges. Furthermore, even though states are well equipped to control government employees ([Rosenfeld, 2017, 2021](#)), public servants have disproportionately participated in some episodes of political transition and revolutionary upheavals ([Beissinger, 2022](#); [Beissinger et al., 2015](#)). Therefore, states would be particularly motivated and able to extend their organizational reach among employees for pro-government mobilization.

To support our argument, we present the first analysis of subnational pro-government mobilization. We specifically examine the variation in state-led mobilization at the subnational level in Iran. The geographic spread of state-led mobilization is significant, as these activities allow the state to mobilize its supporters throughout the country, creating a powerful display of popular legitimacy, intimidating the opposition, and neutralizing potential threats. Our analysis is conducted at the district level, encompassing 429 districts in Iran from 2015 to 2019.

We analyze 12,055 unique pro-government events that we have originally collected from three Iranian news agencies through a two-stage automatic and manual coding. We conduct our analysis at the level of 429 districts in Iran from 2015 to 2019. This original data, based on local sources, shows a significant difference (more than six times) in the number of records compared to an existing cross-national data set (Mass Mobilization in Autocracies Database) ([Hellmeier and Weidmann, 2020](#)). This difference highlights the importance of using locally sourced data sets for subnational analyses of mobilization dynamics ([Clarke, 2021](#)). We also present first-hand data about 25,550 mosque centers throughout Iranian districts. Using random-effects negative binomial regression models, we find that districts with a higher number of mosque centers, university students, and state employees are likely to have more pro-government rallies at the district level. We supplement our statistical analysis by presenting a descriptive background of these state

infrastructural organizations and how they contribute to pro-government mobilization.

Pro-Government Mobilization and Authoritarian Regimes

In this article, we follow the definition presented by [Ekiert and Perry \(2020, p. 5\)](#) for state-mobilized movements: “an umbrella concept [that] encompasses an array of collective social and political actions instigated or encouraged by state agents to advance state interests.” Studies of non-democratic regimes suggest that totalitarian regimes maintain high level of mobilization, while authoritarian regimes keep it low. These regimes avoid popular mobilization because the masses pose the greatest threat to their power ([Linz, 1970, 2000](#); [McAdam and Tarrow, 2018](#)). However, contemporary authoritarians have increasingly seen the masses as a useful source for enhancing their rule and increasing their chance of survival. Autocrats try to capture the streets not only to repress opponents but also to mobilize their supporters. As [Roberston \(2010, p. 31\)](#) argues, “mobilization is not just about voting. An authoritarian regime’s survival requires demonstrating the power and strength of incumbents and the weakness of their opponents outside of elections to discourage potential challengers.”

The third wave of authoritarianism in the mid-1990s changed the tactics and characteristics of authoritarian regimes ([Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019](#)). Contemporary authoritarian regimes have developed new tactics, such as holding regular elections ([Levitsky and Way, 2010](#); [Schedler, 2015](#)), creating authoritarian institutions ([Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007](#); [Lagacé and Gandhi, 2015](#)), and establishing mass organizations ([Brownlee, 2007](#); [Handlin, 2016](#)), to present a spectacle of accountability without much substance.

Mobilizing the masses through rallies, public gatherings, and campaigns to support state interests and agendas is one of the tactics that autocrats have adopted to achieve multiple purposes. Autocrats mobilize their supporters to respond to threats from anti-government movements ([Ekiert et al., 2020](#); [Hellmeier and Weidmann, 2020](#); [Ketchley, 2016](#); [Kruszewska and Ekiert, 2020](#)), to intimidate the opposition and prevent future challenges ([Beissinger, 2020](#); [Hement, 2015](#)), to gather support for electoral competition with opposition parties ([Handlin, 2020](#)), to enhance their developmental projects ([Looney, 2020](#); [Palmer and Ning, 2020](#)), to signal their support for territorial and geostrategic interests beyond their borders ([Greene and Robertson, 2020](#)), and to reinforce their foreign and security policy-signaling strategy ([Weiss, 2014](#)). In light of the recent wave of democratic erosion and the rise of incumbents with authoritarian tendencies within electoral democracies, pro-government mobilization tactics have become more common within institutional democracies ([Cunningham and Owens, 2020](#); [Kydd, 2021](#)). The assault on Capitol Hill in the United States by President Trump’s supporters to

overturn his electoral defeat is an example of pro-government mobilization in eroded democracies.

Scholars have focused on the threat of anti-government mobilization to explain the variation in levels of pro-government mobilization. Through a cross-national time-series analysis, [Hellmeier and Weidmann \(2020\)](#) find large increases in pro-government rallies during significant domestic opposition mobilization episodes. They argue that pro-government mobilization helps autocrats signal their strength and counterbalance oppositional efforts against the regime in the face of direct challenges. Similarly, an event-history analysis of protest mobilization in Egypt from 2011 to 2013 finds that the intensity of pro-government demonstrations increased after opposition protests ([Anderson and Cammett, 2020](#)).

This literature explains the reactive dimension of pro-government mobilization. However, as we argue in this article, a sizable portion of pro-government mobilization in Iran is institutionalized and is not organized in an ad hoc manner in reaction to ongoing protests. To explore the institutionalized dimension of pro-government mobilization, we examine social arenas where states extend their organizational reach.

State-mobilized Movements and Organizations

Social movement literature has shown that social movement organizations are important for the emergence and sustenance of social movements. They channel resources into collective action, design strategies, cultivate leaders, and recruit members ([Davis et al., 2005](#); [Ganz, 2009](#); [McCarthy, 2013](#); [Walker and Martin, 2018](#)). Organizations are vital for the continuity of contentious collective action over time. They can transform short-lived insurgent episodes into long-term movements ([McAdam, 1982](#)).

Contenders can create their own social movement organizations to organize and mobilize protests. However, in cases where they lack such organizations, they rely on existing indigenous organizations. These organizations offer associational networks that are developed through regular interactions, creating stable infrastructures for mobilization. Additionally, they create “established structures of solidarity incentives” that encourage participation by providing interpersonal rewards, thus sustaining long-term mobilization efforts ([McAdam, 1982, p. 53](#); [Pinckney et al., 2022](#)). Indigenous organizations can serve other purposes, such as worship (e.g., churches) or education (e.g., universities). Accordingly, contenders can use indigenous organizations as instruments of contention and vehicles for protest mobilization. For example, black churches and black colleges were two of the main indigenous organizations that became the mobilizing vehicles of the civil rights movement in its initial stage ([McAdam, 1982](#)).

Authoritarian regimes often employ repression as a means to prevent or dismantle the formation of social movement organizations (SMOs). However, they may also seek to expand their organizational infrastructure within existing indigenous organizations in order to neutralize any potential threats. While contenders can utilize indigenous organizations for mobilization purposes, authoritarian regimes can adopt similar practices to preempt threats and garner support (Berman, 2021; Lachapelle, 2022). The Gramscian perspective within civil society scholarship argues that political projects led by incumbent regimes can shape the organizational structure of civil society (Gramsci, 1971; Riley, 2005). These projects, along with the prevailing political context, enable autocratic regimes to politicize the realm of civic associations in line with their own agenda and reinforce their “infrastructural power” (Mann, 1984, p. 189). Accordingly, Gramsci views places of worship (churches) and educational institutions (schools and universities) as sites of domination and control by the ruling elite over society (Gramsci, 1971; Riley, 2005). By exerting control and infiltration in places of worship and universities, autocrats can mitigate potential organizational threats posed by indigenous organizations formed by worshippers or students, thus promoting obedience, loyalty, and support (Gerschewski, 2013; Yan, 2014). China and Russia, the two leading autocratic states in the world, have particularly forged alternative government-oriented organizations in universities and churches while controlling their public servants (Forrat, 2016; Perry, 2017, 2020).

To summarize, authoritarian states have a strong incentive to infiltrate sectors that can serve as organizational infrastructure for anti-regime mobilization. As we elaborate below, university campuses and places of worship are two sectors that have frequently provided organizational support for mobilizing against autocratic governments in various countries and regions (Dahlum and Wig, 2020; Djupe and Gilbert, 2008; Rosenfeld, 2020). Additionally, we identify public servants as a group that the state possesses exceptional capabilities to monitor, organize, and mobilize. However, in cases where public servants defect to the opposition, as has occurred in several recent revolutions, this defection can pose significant damage to the incumbent regime, given that public servants are one of the backbones of autocratic rule. We argue that autocratic states are motivated to extend their organizational network among worshippers, university students, and public servants. In places where such networks are extended, we expect to see higher rates of pro-government mobilization than in areas where such networks are less developed.

Government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) are top-down organizations that help authoritarian regimes gain grassroots support. Governments establish and fund these organizations for multiple purposes. First, states sponsor GONGOs to carry out functions often provided by NGOs while canceling their threats to the authoritarian rule (Hasmath et al., 2019). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as non-state actors often promote

participation, and provide citizens with the capacity for collective action that threatens authoritarian rulers. NGOs can also recruit motivated members to provide public goods that rulers sometimes cannot offer. For example, a survey of the “Círculos Bolivarianos” members founded by Hugo Chavez in Venezuela shows that while the members shared democratic values and practices, the organization’s linkage to the state undermined its ability to institutionalize and act independently. Although the organization provided significant social work, it reinstated clientelist connections with Chavez and did not contribute to the pluralism in the broader civil society (Hawkins and Hansen, 2006). Second, as NGOs are often beneficiaries of international aid and funding, autocrats can also use GONGOs to gather and channel NGO aid as support for their economic policies and developmental plans. Through GONGOs, autocrats redirect international aid to organizations under state control. For example, the Vietnamese government collected international NGO aid in the 1980s to create GONGOs for implementing its economic reform plan (Martens, 2006). Third, these organizations also provide political support crucial for the survival of authoritarian regimes. In Venezuela, for example, Hugo Chavez’s government formed “communal councils” throughout the country to initially engage community participation in the local distribution of resources (Handlin, 2016). These organizations later provided tremendous support for his electoral victory in 2006. In general, these organizations propagate the official values and discourses of the regime, train leaders, recruit members, provide resources, and coordinate pro-government collective events (Robertson, 2009).

Places of Worship. Previous scholarship has identified places of worship as free spaces that can provide opposition groups with resources and spaces to organize collective actions. Such places aid collective actions in multiple ways. Places of worship can provide potentially motivated recruits (McAdam, 1982), offer convenient locations and networks for mobilization (Lohmann, 1994; Opp and Gern, 1993), reduce the cost and risk of state repression because of their sanctity (Fair and Ganguly, 2008; Wickham, 2002), promote the acquisition of civil skills (Djupe and Gilbert, 2008, 2015), and facilitate mass uprisings during revolutionary mobilization episodes (Ketchley and Barrie, 2019). For example, black churches were the primary organizational vehicle for the Civil Rights Movement, particularly in the early stages (Morris, 1984). Likewise, Islamists in Pakistan used mosques during Friday prayers to organize rallies, protests, and demonstrations, allowing them to advance their Islamic agenda and veto non-Islamist policies from 2005 to 2010 (Butt, 2016). The Muslim Brotherhood and supporters of Muhammad Morsi also relied on mosques to orchestrate anti-coup protests in Egypt in 2013 (Ketchley, 2017).

However, we argue that states can also dominate the places of worship and use them to pursue their interests. This dominance allows the states to utilize the capabilities of worship places to produce state-favored rallies. For

example, throughout the communist era in Poland, the Catholic Church was an ideological rival of the Communist Party. On various occasions, Catholics resorted to street mobilization against Communist rule (Osa, 1995). The Communist Party avoided and rejected using brute force against the Catholic Church because such confrontations were too costly for the party given the church's nationalist credentials. To address and tackle this issue, the Communist government created an organization called "Patriot" or "Progressive" Priests (*Księża Patriotci*) to recruit from the elite clergy and absorb lower-ranking priests into the Communist Party (Nalepa and Pop-Eleches, 2022).

Furthermore, the Italian Fascist Party in the 1920s also infiltrated Catholic Church organizations and relied on their associations to boost their mobilization capacity and promote their agenda (Riley, 2005; Riley and Fernández, 2015). In recent times, Ethiopian leaders have re-engaged the previously oppressed churches to mobilize and participate in activities that have supported incumbents and boosted their legitimacy (Rhodes, 2020). Moreover, the Russian government under Vladimir Putin has engaged church representatives to give pro-government sermons at state-sponsored public events (Smyth et al., 2013), and Turkish municipalities under Recep Tayyip Erdogan have also provided funds for religious organizations in exchange for participating in pro-government mobilization (Yabancı, 2019, 2021). In Turkey, also, Islamists have utilized mosques as venues for Islamist mobilization, creating a movement through daily interactions that enhanced their ability to pursue their political and social agendas (Tuğal, 2009a, b). By taking over places of worship, states can eliminate the possibility of opposition groups using these spaces for anti-government activities. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: *Areas with more places of worship are likely to experience higher pro-government mobilization.*

University Students. Student movements have played a crucial role in driving social and political transformations in recent decades. University campuses have frequently emerged as focal points for anti-regime protests and riots worldwide. On a daily basis, universities foster social networks and interactions through student activities that facilitate collective actions. Moreover, universities are home to a plethora of student organizations that enhance mobilization capacities for collective action and protest. These organizations can be further strengthened and expanded through collaboration with existing organizations, such as churches and public sector offices. Last, university campuses offer physical spaces that are conducive to gatherings, mitigating collective action problems (Dahlum and Wig, 2020; Staniland, 2014).

Students have also been involved in anti-government movements in both democratic regimes, such as the USA and Europe (De Groot, 1998), and non-

democratic regimes in China (Zhao, 2001), Latin America (Bidegain and Von Bülow, 2021), former Soviet countries (Kassow, 1989; Nikolayenko, 2007; Robertson, 2009), Africa (Amutabi, 2002; Rukato, 2020), and recently Arab countries during the Arab Spring (Campante and Chor, 2012; Ketchley, 2013). Drawing on subnational geocoded data on the location of universities and protest events from 1991 to 2016 across 62 countries in Africa and Central America, Dahlum and Wig (2020) find that places with a higher number of universities were likely to experience higher protests. Similarly, an event-history analysis of the 1960s sit-ins in the United States finds that this form of protest was more frequent in places with a higher population of black college students (Andrews and Biggs, 2016).

To counterbalance the threat of student activism, authoritarian regimes have developed a variety of control mechanisms: limiting student coalitions by reshaping the educational system (Forrat, 2016), spreading conservative values that politically support the regime status quo (Perry, 2017), regulating student associations to serve the ruling party (Doyon and Tsimonis, 2022), and relying on university students for electoral support (Schatz, 2009). Authoritarian regimes also try to suppress independent student activism and substitute it with state-sponsored student organizations (Connelly and Grüttner, 2005). As Zhao (2001) argues in his study of the Tiananmen student movement, student concentration on university campuses provides a space that facilitates mobilization and recruitment for the oppositional student movement in a context where student organizations are very weak or non-existent. This means that the indigenous organization of university campuses could become a source of threat to the regime. On the other hand, the ruling party in China had also established the Chinese Communist Youth League (CYL) to gain support among Chinese students. These mass, state-affiliated student organizations on university campuses provide an organizational infrastructure for acts of pro-state mobilization (Perry, 2020). Accordingly, we hypothesize that:

H2: *Areas with a larger student population are more likely to have higher rates of pro-government mobilization.*

State Employees. Along with places of worship and university campuses, the recent literature also refers to government offices as places that provide networks and organizations for potential challengers (Dahlum and Wig, 2020). Scholars have not traditionally considered state employees as indigenous organizations, but state employee networks in the workplace provide venues for organization and unionization. However, states are well equipped to monitor, organize, and mobilize public servants for their support. During periods of political transition, state employees might defect and join the opposition. Such defections would deal a severe blow to incumbent regimes.

For instance, an analysis of data from the Arab barometer shows that in both Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions, government employees disproportionately participated in these uprisings (Beissinger, 2022; Beissinger et al., 2015).

As the existing scholarship states, public servants who benefit from state employment are discouraged from participating in anti-government activities (Chen, 2013; Jones, 1998; Rosenfeld, 2017, 2021). Accordingly, by increasing the number of state-dependent individuals, autocratic regimes aim to weaken the recruitment of anti-government movements. During anti-government upheavals, such organizational building can allow authoritarian regimes to limit anti-government protests. For example, during the 2011 Syrian uprising, local communities with strong links to the state remained inactive and supported the regime, while other communities with no such access engaged in contentious actions against the state (Mazur, 2019). Furthermore, to avoid an embarrassingly low turnout, Nicolas Maduro mobilized state employees to participate and vote for the Constituent Assembly in 2017. Roughly 2.8 million state employees, a sizable part of Venezuela's population, are often required to attend government rallies and listen to Maduro's calls (Ulmer and Aponte, 2017).

We extend this argument and contend that state employees could provide a strategic and easy target for participation in pro-government rallies, as autocratic states can both provide incentives for and monitor their employees. Furthermore, state officials can rely on different state agencies to coordinate collective action at the local, regional, and national levels. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H3: *Areas with a large state employee sector are more likely to have higher rates of pro-government mobilization.*

Pro-Government Mobilization and its Organizational Infrastructure in Iran

Since the inception of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution, Iran has witnessed high levels of pro-government mobilization. Islamists who came to power in Iran in 1979 have exerted extensive efforts to build and extend their organizational reach within Iranian society. Such organization-building efforts began prior to the revolution, as Islamists were competing with other oppositional factions in their struggle against the monarchy in Iran. As the Islamists switched their position from opposition to the power holders, they faced new challenges from other revolutionary factions and tried to extend their organizations in universities, mosques, and government offices.

Initially, Islamists who took power mobilized their supporters against other revolutionary groups. Islamists notably used their gangs to break up

opponents' political meetings and capture the streets (Abrahamian, 1989; Arjomand, 1988). When Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in September 1980, the Islamists then used their voluntary organizations to recruit their supporters for fighting on the battlefields against Iraq (Razoux, 2015). Even though Iran benefited from a conscription system left by the pre-revolutionary regime, the state mobilized more volunteers than conscripted soldiers.

With the end of the Iran-Iraq War, different forms of pro-government mobilization continued in Iran. Government-affiliated militias enforced the Islamists' code of conduct for women and youth regarding their cover and appearance in public places (Shahrokhni, 2019). With the election of Mohammad Khatami in 1997 and the intensification of Iran's factional competition between reformists and conservatives, pro-government mobilization continued, this time in support of the conservative faction against the mobilization of students and reformist activities in the press (Arjomand, 1988). Pro-government mobilization in Iran again peaked in 2009, during the "Green Movement," when the state faced anti-government demonstrations in Tehran and a few other major cities. These demonstrations were the largest since the upheavals of the revolution (Alimaghani, 2020). In that year, pro-government mobilization was used both to break up the opposition protests and show force in pro-government rallies independent of the protest events of the opposition.

During the last four decades, the Islamic Republic has relied on various organizations to mobilize its supporters. In contrast to other social revolutions in the 20th century, the Iranian revolution did not have a vanguard party to organize and lead the revolution. Instead, the revolution was led by a loose leadership network that connected various opposition groups such as Islamists, Nationalists, Marxists, and Islamist-Marxists. This leadership relied on informal networks in mosques, seminaries, universities, and bazaars to mobilize the masses. With the fall of the monarchy and in competition with other revolutionary groups, the Islamists founded several formal organizations such as the Islamic Republican Party (IRP), the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Construction Jihad (*Sazman-e Jihad-e Sazandegi*), the Organization of the Islamic Propaganda (*Sazman-e Tablighat-e Eslami*), and the Basij militia, all active in organizing and coordinating different instances of pro-government mobilization (Alemzadeh, 2018; Ehsani, 2016; Lob, 2020). Among these organizations, while the IRP dissolved in the 1980s, both the IRGC and Construction Jihad became fully formalized within the state structure. The Basij has remained a grassroots militia organization active in pro-government mobilization and has been instrumental in operating as an institution of control for policing society, attacking opposition gatherings, and enforcing Islamist codes of conduct for youth and women (Golkar, 2015). Furthermore, starting in the 1990s, the incumbent Islamists began concerted efforts to formalize one crucial informal network they had relied on for

organization and mobilization during the revolution and the war with Iraq: mosques.

Mosques and Mosque Centers. Mosques are one of the critical pieces in Iran's infrastructural and institutional web of post-revolutionary state infrastructure. Mosques gave Islamists before the revolution "a massive institutional network, perhaps the largest civic organization in the country" (Kurzman, 2004, p. 38), to penetrate every neighborhood and organize protest activities. The Islamic Revolution offered a fertile ground for Islamists to incorporate mosques into the state hierarchy and utilize their organizational capacities.

In 1990, two years after the war with Iraq, the government started an extensive campaign to institutionalize and formalize the mosque-state linkages. That year, the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution (*Showraye-e 'Ali-e Enghelab-e Farhangi*) passed an enactment to establish mosque centers within mosques throughout the country. Mosque centers as non-profit organizations are under the authority of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (*Vezerat-e Farhand va Ershad-e Esmali*). Nonetheless, the council of mosque centers includes representatives from 13 different governmental organizations, the majority of which are under the direct authority of the IRI leader, Ali Khamenei. Several of these organizations that participate in the leadership of mosque centers are actively involved in organizing pro-government mobilization events. These organizations include the Organization of Islamic Propaganda, which has a leading role in organizing and coordinating pro-government events, and the Basij militia. According to a publication by the Ministry of Culture, there are more than 25,000 mosque centers nationwide, with over 2 million members (Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, 2021).

Mosque centers provide a wide variety of activities for their members. First, they organize cultural and recreational activities such as foreign language classes, Quran readings, religious festivals, and sports classes. Mosque centers also encourage and bring their members to participate in state-led rallies such as the anniversary of the 1979 revolution. These centers are also supposed to be active in organizing activities to help and provide for the poor (Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, 2021).

Students. Students played a significant role in overthrowing the monarchy and achieving the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Different student groups from leftist, nationalist, and Islamist factions were active on university campuses during the revolutionary period. As part of their struggle against other revolutionary factions, the Islamists resorted to repression and mobilization of their supporters to purge rival groups from university campuses. To this end, Islamists closed universities for two years (1981–1983) in the name of the Cultural Revolution (*Enghelab-e Farhangi*) to purify and recreate universities based on Islamic ideology. Professors, students, and activists who

supported leftists or nationalists were fired and replaced by state-approved individuals (Golkar, 2015; Razavi, 2009).

Following the reopening of universities in 1983, Islamist student activists established the Unity Office (*Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat*) as the leading student organization on university campuses. The Unity Office later became the primary vehicle for mobilizing students to support the reformists during the 1990s. However, as hard-liners subjected students to repression and reformists showed weakness in protecting students and other repressed groups, the Unity Office radicalized and broke up with the reformists. As the Unity Office radicalized, it became the subject of further state exclusion and internal fragmentation to the extent that the organization lost its leading role among the students (Rivetti, 2020; Rivetti and Cavatorta, 2014). At the same time, conservatives increased their influence by establishing and supporting pro-regime associations. The Islamic Society of Students (*Jame'-e Eslami-ye Daneshjuyan*) and the University Student Basij Organization (*Sazmane-e Basij-e Daneshjuyi*) became two main state-affiliated organizations among students that seek to suppress the oppositional student activities and take university campuses under control.

Ahmadinejad's victory in the 2005 presidential election was the starting point for increasing the state's control over universities by supporting pro-regime associations. Similar to the Cultural Revolution period, independent student associations were dissolved, and many students and professors were sacked and replaced by state-approved individuals (Golkar, 2010, 2013).

State Employees. Public servants were among the social groups that joined the revolutionary movement of 1978–79 at a later stage, in contrast to students and people active in mosques. However, the defection of public servants was a turning point for the revolution, as their strikes paralyzed the function of various state institutions in the months before the fall of the monarchy. As the monarchy fell, revolutionaries engaged in large-scale purges in state institutions and hired new employees loyal to the revolutionary ideology. In addition to firing and hiring in institutions that continued from the pre-revolutionary regime, the Islamic Republic also founded new revolutionary institutions with fresh new recruits from the ranks of the Islamists. The Revolutionary Guards, the Construction Jihad, and the Organization of the Islamic Propaganda are some of the new post-revolutionary institutions (Abrahamian, 2009). According to Ehsani (2011), one in every six Iranians above the age of 15 belonged to one or more post-revolutionary organizations in the early years of the Islamic Republic. To ensure the loyalty of new employees, the state established the public servants' Basij (*Basij-e Edari*) offices in 1990, following the leader's approval of a decree that required every state organization to have a Basij office. These public servant offices continued to expand throughout the country. The expansion peaked during

Ahmadinejad's presidency, resulting in about 860,000 government employees being members of the Basij public servants, organized into 7,600 offices throughout the country (Golkar, 2015). These offices, along with representatives of the leader (*Namayandeye-e Vali-ye Faqih*), are responsible for recruiting and organizing government employees in all state bureaus. To encourage employees to become members of Basij, the public servant office provides privileges and selective incentives for employees in state jobs. In addition, the state actively publishes invitations for those who participate in state-favored rallies. By having these state organizations widely present and offering these incentives, the Iranian government fosters ordinary people's dependency on the state and thereby strengthens its pro-government mobilization capacity.

Data

Outcome: Pro-Government Mobilization in Iran

To capture the diversity of state-led mobilization, we draw upon an original data set of pro-government mobilization in Iran from January 1st 2015 to December 31st 2019. For pro-government events, we relied on three local news agencies: Farsnews¹ (the most popular website among the conservatives), Tasnim² (the second most popular website among conservatives), and Basijnews³ (the official news agency of Basij Force). These news agencies are funded and supported by the government. We chose news agencies rather than newspapers because news agencies provide more reports with broader coverage and more details in reporting collective action events.

We gathered this data through a two-stage coding procedure. In the first stage, we used computational web scraping methods to search, retrieve, and store articles containing frequent keywords covering mobilization reports by the news agencies mentioned above: protest, rally, mobilization, commemoration, funeral, and others (see [Table A6](#) in the Appendix for the complete list of keywords with their English translations). Since we relied on three local news agencies, the probability of double and duplicate reporting of an event is high. We then reviewed the retrieved data as human coders in the second stage and checked the reports' accuracy, relevancy, and uniqueness. This manual coding allowed us to address both the "selection problem," which is the problem of choosing articles containing only relevant information, and the "information extraction problem," which refers to the identification of parts in each report containing information about the key variables of interest (Weidmann and Rød, 2019). To tackle double counting, we sorted the data based on each report's date, location, service, and source. This combination allowed us to find the number of repetitions for each event among our sources and showed the variation and intensity of reporting collective action events in

Iran (Hellmeier et al., 2018). Likewise, manual coding also equipped us to categorize events based on their types of activity.

Using this two-staged coding procedure, we reviewed over five million news entries and found over 30 thousand entries containing the aforementioned keyword dictionaries. After filtering out relevant news from irrelevant ones, we reached 17,140 events with duplicates and, ultimately, 12,055 unique pro-government events across three state-sponsored news agencies. Furthermore, we also searched the content of our unique entries to check whether university students and public sector employees have participated in the pro-government mobilization. We also checked whether the event happened inside or in front of a mosque or ended at a mosque as a proxy for the engagement of mosques with pro-government events. Through this coding process, we recorded 4,031 (32%) events with mosque involvement, 1,103 (9%) events with university student participation, and 3,539 (28%) events with state employee participation (see [Table A7](#) in the Appendix for the complete list of keywords with their English translations).

Notably, we identified rallies that have received particular attention in the literature (Hellmeier and Weidmann, 2020). Following Weidmann and Rød (2019) and McAdam and Su (2002), we define rallies as public gatherings of people with an expressed, chief purpose of supporting the government, which were held in public spaces, such as streets, rather than private settings. Out of 12,055 unique pro-government events, there were 3,884 rallies and 8,171 other events in Iran from the beginning of 2015 to the end of 2019. The other category includes commemorations, funerals of those considered martyrs by the state, and infrastructural activities.

A comparison of our data based on local news sources with an existing data set based on international news agencies shows that our data has a much broader coverage. The Mass Mobilization in Autocracies Database (MMAD; Hellmeier and Weidmann, 2020; Weidmann and Rød, 2019) is a primary cross-national data set covering pro-government rallies from 2003 to 2019 in its latest version (version 4). MMAD captures 113 pro-government rallies in 64 districts for the 2015–2019 period, while our data covers 3,884 (34 times) rallies from 385 districts over the same period (see [Figure 2](#), top figures, for the frequency of pro-government mobilization and pro-government rally events in Iran from 2015 to 2019). The substantial difference in the number of events covered by local news agencies versus international newswires highlights the acute problems of missingness in some cross-national events databases (Clarke, 2021). For our subnational study, we therefore opted not to use “off-the-shelf” data and gather first-hand data from local sources. We use the annual and monthly aggregates of total pro-government mobilization events and pro-government rallies at the district level as our primary dependent variables. We mainly focus on rallies because the literature has considered

rallies as the most critical type of pro-government mobilization (see the [Appendix](#) for a detailed explanation of the coding procedure).

Independent Variables

We focus on mosque centers as one primary state organizational infrastructure contributing to pro-government mobilization in Iran. We gathered data on the mosque centers from the mosque center's database.⁴ Each center has a specific web page as an entry in the database. Each entry contains information about the center's name, the name of the mosque, and the center's location. We used computational web scraping methods to access each entry and gather all the information mentioned above. Finally, we aggregated the data at the district level.

Regarding university students and based on the 2016 Iranian population and housing census, we calculated the percentage of university students out of the total population for each district. Respecting state employees and based on the 2011 Iranian population and housing census, we calculated the percentage of state employees out of the total number of employees for each district. It would have been ideal to extract this information from the 2016 census. Unfortunately, the 2016 census does not include private versus public job information. This is, however, not a problem for our analysis as we do not expect a meaningful change from 2011 to 2016 at the subnational level, and 2011 data is representative enough for our purpose. ([Figure 1](#) presents the geographic dispersion of pro-government mobilization events standardized by district population throughout the country.)

Control Variables

The existing literature indicates an association between anti-government protests and pro-government rallies ([Anderson and Cammett, 2020](#); [Hellmeier and Weidmann, 2020](#)). Thus, we include control variables to measure both anti-regime and social protests at the district level. We have distinguished between anti-regime and social protests based on the demands and slogans of protestors. We have categorized protests as anti-regime when protestors have chanted slogans against the entire regime, called for the regime's downfall, or targeted the head of state and asked for his death. We have categorized protests as social when groups such as workers, teachers, nurses, and the unemployed, among others, have raised demands about higher wages, unpaid wages, unemployment, and similar issues. We rely on original data sets of social and anti-government protests in Iran collected from local and international news agencies and videos posted by individuals on social media.

During the period of our analysis, two waves of anti-regime protests occurred in Iran—in December 2017 and November 2019. For data on these

waves of anti-government contention, we relied on Kadivar et al. (2023a) and Kadivar et al. (2023b) data, which were gathered based on the videos posted on social media by protesters, along with protest reports covered by both governmental and oppositional news agencies. These two data sets contain 473 records of anti-government mobilization for the 2015–2019 period in Iran.

For the data on social protests, we rely on an original data set of social protests in Iran collected from the Iranian Labor News Agency (ILNA),⁵ Iranian Students' News Agency (ISNA),⁶ and Tasnim.⁷ We focused on these news agencies because they provide the most comprehensive coverage of social protests in the country. This combination of non-conservative (ILNA and ISNA) and conservative (Tasnim) sources also allows us to reduce potential biases in reporting protests driven by the agencies' ideology. We followed the same two-staged procedure as we did for our pro-government events data. In the first stage, we used computational web scraping methods to search through more than 850,000 news articles. Our search terms related to various protest activities resulted in 5,780 entries. After manual coding and excluding false positive (selected articles that cover unrelated protests) records, we ended with 3,127 unique social protest events (see Figure 2, bottom figures, for the frequency of protests in Iran from 2015 to 2019).

Similar to pro-government mobilization records, comparing our data with an existing cross-national data set shows much broader coverage. Mass Mobilization in Autocracies Database (MMAD) captured 479 anti-

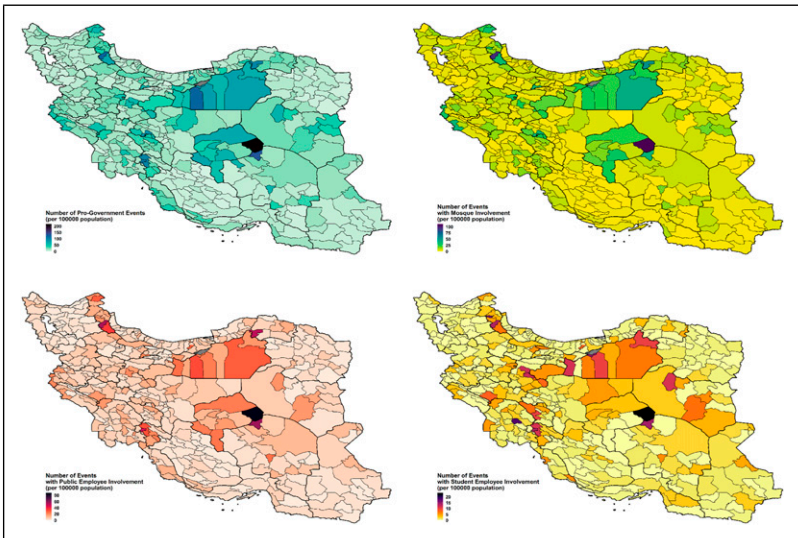


Figure 1. Districts with pro-government mobilization in Iran 2015–2019.

government protest events in 146 districts from 2015 to 2019, while we gathered 3,127 (6 times) social and anti-government protests in 212 districts for the same period. Figure 2 shows that there are higher rates of government-sponsored events in Iran than social and anti-government protests. This is not surprising as pro-government events are obviously not subject to repression and are easily coordinated at local, regional, and national levels with abundant resources. These events also receive much better media coverage by state-sanctioned news agencies.

The literature indicates that economic sanctions can heighten pro-government mobilizations (Hellmeier, 2020). We created a dummy variable for Iran's period under sanctions as proxy for potential impacts of international sanctions. This variable has a value of 1 from the beginning of our analysis in January 2015 until January 2016, when the sanctions were lifted due to the nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany). The variable received a value of 0 until November 2018, when President Trump unilaterally imposed sanctions on Iran.

For a proxy of the level of subnational development, we use a measure of hospital beds, calculated as the rate of public hospital beds per 1000 persons based on 2016 Iran statistical yearbooks at the district level. We also gathered data on Iranian NGOs from the Iran NGO database⁸ to test the potential impacts of NGOs on pro-government mobilization events. Each NGO has a specific web page as an entry in the database. Each entry contains information about the NGO's name, location, year of establishment, and activities. To gather data on NGOs in Iran, we used computational web scraping methods to

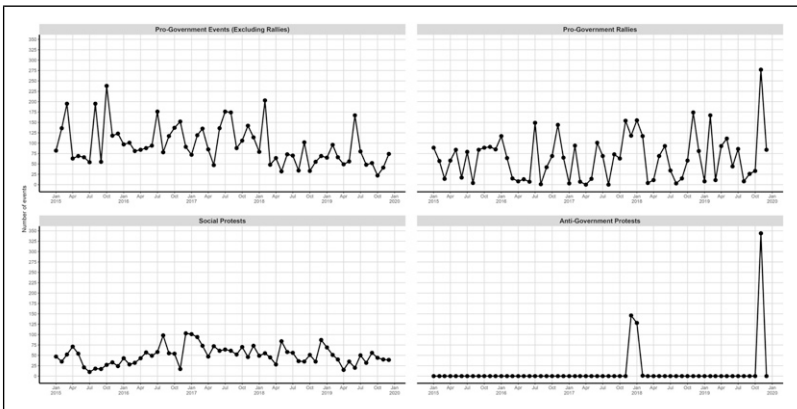


Figure 2. Number of monthly pro-government mobilization, pro-government rallies, social protests, and anti-governmental protests in Iran 2015–2019.

access each entry and gather all the information mentioned above. Then, we aggregated the data at the district level.

We also include controls for the population of each district and the percentage of the population living in urban areas from the 2016 census. Finally, we include controls to measure each district's distance to the capital (Tehran) and the capital of each province. This is a proxy for each district's access to state resources (Weidmann, 2009). For ease of comparison, we have standardized all of the independent variables by subtracting all values from the mean and dividing them by the standard deviation. This results in a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1 for all standardized variables (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics, which shows the non-standardized summary of our dependent and independent variables).

Regression Models and Results

Regression Models

We use negative binomial models (Allison and Waterman, 2002; Hilbe, 2011, 2014) to test our hypotheses on the number of pro-government rallies. Since overdispersion is an issue with protest event data in general, and our data on pro-government events in particular, negative binomial models are preferred over Poisson models (Hendrix & Haggard, 2015). To account for unit effects, we use random-effects parameters in all models. Fixed-effect models are suitable for causal inference, but they require time-variant variables of interest. Given that the organizational level data within each district are relatively stable within the five-years of our analysis, and data for these variables are available only at a single time point, random-effects models are more suitable. Random-effect models are appropriate for analyzing clustered data, where the observations are grouped by some factor, such as location or time. Moreover, these models account for potential correlations within groups and reduce bias in parameter estimates (Wooldridge, 2011, 2019). Since our dependent variable is clustered by district over time, and we aim to explore between-group variation rather than within-group variation, random-effect models are better suited to our empirical design than fixed-effect models. By accounting for the variation between clusters, random effect regression models can improve the efficiency of the estimates compared to fixed-effects models. Additionally, year and month dummy variables are included in all models to control common time trends across all units.

Results

The main results are displayed in Table 2. The outcome of the first model is the non-standardized aggregate of all types of pro-government mobilization in a

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Pro-government mobilization (total)	.49	1.23	.00	35.00
Pro-government rally	.15	.48	.00	10.00
Mosque centers	59.56	62.89	1.00	513.00
University students (percent)	3.60	1.64	.85	19.73
State employees (percent)	18.51	7.86	3.73	73.38
Social protest	.12	1.01	.00	57.00
Anti-government protest	.02	.30	.00	11.00
Sanction	.42	.49	.00	1.00
NGOs	57.20	182.46	.00	3115.00
Public hospital beds (per 1000)	1.15	.91	.00	6.75
District total population	186308.32	503964.96	7402.00	8737510.00
Urban population (percent)	55.93	22.01	5.76	99.51
Distance to province center (km)	131.01	104.62	.00	657.00
Distance to capital (km)	686.30	392.03	.00	1807.00

given district. Among our main standardized independent variables, the measures for mosque centers, college students, and public employees are positive and statistically significant. These results support our hypothesis that districts with higher rates of mosque centers, student population, and public employees show higher rates of pro-government mobilization, including all types. In addition, the measure for the urban population is also statistically significant, indicating that most of the events have occurred within urban areas.

For the outcome of our second model, we focus on rallies because of the particular attention that pro-government rallies have received from the literature (Anderson and Cammett, 2020; Hellmeier and Weidmann, 2020). The results for our main independent variables are similar to model 1 and remain significant.

Finally, we present a monthly model to add time-variant controls—anti-regime protests and sanctions—to our model. The literature indicates that pro-government mobilization increases during heightened anti-government protests and international sanctions (Anderson and Cammett, 2020; Hellmeier, 2020; Hellmeier and Weidmann, 2020; Ketchley, 2016). Since the literature stresses the effect of these variables on rallies specifically, we also include rallies as an outcome of this model. Our results at the subnational level confirm the literature, while the effect of our main independent variables remains unchanged.

For ease of interpretation, we report the results in incidence ratios (exponentiated negative binomial coefficients) representing factor changes in the dependent variable for a one-unit increase in the independent variables. Accordingly, one standard-deviation increase in mosque centers is associated

Table 2. Correlates of pro-government mobilization in Iran.

	(1)Pro-government mobilization (total)	(2)Pro-government Rally (Yearly)	(3)Pro-government Rally (monthly)
Mosque centers (standardized)	1.60*** (8.14)	1.63*** (6.51)	1.62*** (6.36)
University students (percent, standardized)	1.28*** (4.61)	1.25*** (3.46)	1.25*** (3.42)
State employees (percent, standardized)	1.13** (2.52)	1.15** (2.45)	.14** (2.35)
NGOs (standardized)	.79** (-2.13)	1.01 (.08)	1.05 (.32)
Hospital beds per 1000 (standardized)	.99 (-.27)	.99 (-.10)	.99 (-.23)
District total population (standardized)	1.16 (1.39)	.96 (-.31)	.94 (-.44)
Urban population (standardized)	1.31*** (5.09)	1.19*** (2.69)	1.18*** (2.62)
Distance to province center (standardized)	.91* (-1.96)	.94 (-1.03)	.94 (-1.05)
Distance to capital (standardized)	1.00 (-.02)	.97 (-.46)	.97
Sanction			1.14*** (3.90)
Social protest (standardized)			1.00 (-.47)
Anti-government protest (standardized)			1.02*** (3.28)
Constant	10.14*** (18.06)	17.41*** (5.43)	1655536.40 (.08)
Num. Obs.	2145	2145	25740
Year fixed-effect	Yes	Yes	No
month fixed-effect	No	No	Yes
AIC	9482.01	6146.03	16956.14
BIC	9572.75	6236.76	17168.19

Exponentiated coefficients.

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$.

with an increase in yearly instances of pro-government mobilization by a factor of 1.60, holding other variables at observed values. Similarly, a one standard-deviation increase in the percentage of university students is associated with an increase in yearly instances of pro-government mobilization

by a factor of 1.28. Moreover, one standard-deviation increase in the percentage of state employees is associated with an increase in yearly instances of pro-government mobilization by a factor of 1.13. Finally, model 3 shows that a one standard-deviation increase in the monthly instances of anti-government protest is associated with an increase in monthly instances of pro-government rallies by a factor of 1.02, assuming that all other variables are held at their observed values in the model.

Robustness Checks

To handle standard errors in our random-effect models and increase confidence in our results, we subject our findings to other model specifications: random-effects negative binomial regression with robust standard errors (see [Table A1](#) in the Appendix for full regression results) and transforming our variables from count to per capita (see [Table A2](#) for full regression results). These models yield results consistent with our main findings.

There may be some concern that our main explanatory variables could be associated with many other characteristics of the locations where pro-government mobilization occurs. Thus, evidence that these variables play a direct role in mobilizational capacity would help to reassure us that the results presented are not spurious. To provide such evidence for our findings regarding the effect of mosque centers, university students, and public employees, we specify separate models based on the events in which these actors have participated. In each model, we include all the control variables used in the previous table and the participatory variables mentioned above as the dependent variables in each model.

For the sake of convenience, we only present the main independent variables in each model in our coefficient plot. The coefficient plot in [Figure 3](#) shows that places with more mosques have held more government rallies in and around mosques. Likewise, university students participate more in pro-government mobilization in districts with a higher percentage of university students. Last, districts with a higher percentage of state employees exhibit higher participation in pro-government mobilization by state employees (see [Table A3](#) in the Appendix for full regression results).

In addition, one could also argue that large cities such as Tehran might be driving the main results. To address this concern, we excluded the top ten populated cities (Tehran, Mashhad, Esfahan, Karaj, Shiraz, Tabriz, Qom, Ahvaz, Kermanshah, and Urumia) based on the 2016 census and reran the

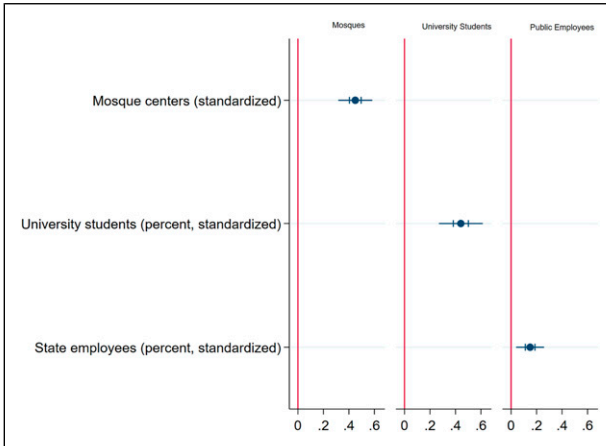


Figure 3. Coefficient plot of actors participating in pro-government events in Iran. Note: The dependent variable in each model is the number of events that have mentioned the participation of particular actors in pro-government events in Iran, such as mosques, university students, and public employees.

models (see [Table A4](#) in the Appendix for full regression results). The results were consistent with our central hypotheses.

Conclusion

What factors shape various levels of pro-government mobilization in authoritarian regimes? The existing literature has considered the threat of anti-regime protest as the primary driver of pro-government mobilization ([Anderson and Cammett, 2020](#); [Hellmeier and Weidmann, 2020](#)). While we confirm this existing finding in the literature at the subnational level, we argue that the institutional and organizational infrastructures of political regimes significantly contribute to pro-regime mobilization. Political regimes do not react to opposition protests in an ad hoc manner but build organizational infrastructure to hold up pro-government collective events even in times of opposition inactivity. As the resource mobilization approach stresses the role of organizations in social movements ([Edwards et al., 2018](#); [McCarthy, 2013](#); [Walker and Martin, 2018](#)), we also emphasize the role of state organizational infrastructure in instances of pro-government mobilization.

We mainly argue that states extend their pro-government organizations to areas previously considered by the literature as indigenous organizations and free spaces that contenders could use as organizing venues when the opposition is organizationally weak and underdeveloped. Existing scholarship has identified places of worship and universities as free spaces and organizational

infrastructures that can threaten authoritarian regimes (Butt, 2016; Dahlum and Wig, 2017, 2020; Ketchley and Barrie, 2019). Public servants differ from these two categories because states enforce higher levels of monitoring over this sector. Nonetheless, if and when public servants defect, they provide a severe blow to the regime (Beissinger, 2022; Beissinger et al., 2015), which makes this sector of particular strategic importance to the state (Rosenfeld, 2020).

To demonstrate this argument, we presented the first subnational analysis of pro-government mobilization in Iran, which has been among the states with the highest rates of pro-government mobilization over recent years (Hellmeier and Weidmann, 2020). This high rate of pro-government contention makes Iran an ideal case for studying the drivers of pro-government mobilization. To test our hypotheses about the organizational infrastructure, we relied on different sets of original data on pro-government mobilization, mosque centers, and other sources of data from Iran's recent census and statistical yearbooks. Using random-effects negative binomial models for the period of 2015–2019, we found statistically significant results suggesting that districts with higher rates of mosque centers, university students, and public employees have higher rates of pro-government mobilization.

Our findings on the importance of mosques in Iran further highlight the political regimes' contentious past in shaping their repertoire of pro-government mobilization. Mosques were one of the significant informal networks that Islamists used during the revolution of 1979 as the primary organizational vehicle for revolutionary mobilization (Kurzman, 2004). Later, Islamists formalized these networks and incorporated them into the state structure to support elevated levels of pro-state mobilization in the country. University students were also active players in the revolutionary movements of 1979. Different revolutionary factions, including Islamists, also had student wings active on campuses. Since then, Islamists have conducted various campaigns to purge opposing factions from campuses and solidify their own organizational branches among university students (Mashayekhi, 2001; Rivetti, 2020). While mosques and universities were among the pioneers of the revolutionary movement in 1978–79, public servants were among groups that defected to the state and joined the revolutionary movement at a later stage. Nonetheless, their defection did severe damage to the monarchy. As Islamists came to power, they have since tried to exert control over public servants and prevent their potential defection to oppositional movements (Abrahamian, 2009; Ehsani, 2011). To sum up, all three factors are related to the contentious past of the Islamic Republic that has also been shaping and driving the regime's current effort in pro-government mobilization.

Our results suggest that districts with higher levels of mosque centers, university students, and state employees have higher pro-government mobilization. As our case description suggests, we argue that these are areas through which the state has built organizations promoting pro-government

mobilization. However, it is worth noting that the extent of state dominance varies across these sectors. In the case of mosque centers, the state's control appears to be nearly absolute, whereas when it comes to universities and public sector offices, the degree of state influence is not as pronounced.

Over the last 40 years, there has not been any significant challenge to the state from the mosques, even though mosques were the primary opposition vehicle during the 1978–79 revolution. University campuses have been sites of opposition to the state, at least from the mid-1990s until the present. Because of this opposition, the state has tried to exert its organizations on university campuses and has its own organized pro-state faction among students. University campuses have remained a contested social site in Iran for the last three decades (Golkar, 2010, 2013). Similarly, public employees have also been involved in different forms of social protest, demanding higher wages and better work conditions, although discontent among state employees has varied between different sectors.

Our auxiliary statistical analysis supports our interpretation of the state's total cooption of mosques and its partial influence on students and public employees. We used similar models to predict hard-liner votes (Ebrahim Raisi) in the 2017 presidential elections (see Table A5 in the Appendix for full regression results). While mosque centers were a positive and statistically significant predictor of the conservative vote, we did not find comparable results for university students and public employees. These results suggest that even though the state holds a certain organizational presence among these two sectors, the government is by no means dominant among university students and public employees. On the contrary, students and public employees have also been involved in different forms of protest and contestation against the state.

A limitation of our analysis is a common problem for collecting data from news sources: the geographically uneven news coverage. The capacity for news reporting may be correlated with our explanatory variables, such as the size of public sector employees. To empirically address this concern, we would need data sources for our dependent variable other than news coverage, for example, internal government reports and communications. At this point, however, we do not have access to such data. Following Robertson (2009), who used interior ministries and government reports to study collective actions in non-democratic regimes, future research can improve the study of pro-government movements by locating such records.

Iran is a revolutionary theocratic regime. To what degree could our findings be extended to other states? We have mentioned examples from Communist Poland (Nalepa and Pop-Eleches, 2022), Fascist Italy (Riley, 2005), Ethiopia (Rhodes, 2020), China (Perry, 2020), Russia (Robertson, 2009), and Turkey (Yabanci, 2019) of organizing churches, university students, and public employees for pro-state activities. These examples suggest government efforts to penetrate these social sectors are not limited to theocratic states such as Iran. Government efforts to infiltrate various social sectors are shaped by a country's contentious history,

institutional settings, and social composition (Nalepa and Pop-Eleches, 2022). Moreover, authoritarian governments learn from one another's practices and innovations in controlling society. The study of state-sponsored mobilization is still in its early stages, and future comparative studies will undoubtedly shed more light on the variations in government projects of societal infiltration.

In this article, we examine the meso-foundation of pro-government mobilization in Iran. Future research can investigate the meso-foundation and organizational infrastructure of pro-government mobilization in other states with elevated levels of state-sponsored events. As our understanding of the organizational drivers of pro-government mobilization in different countries expands, scholars will be able to investigate pro-government mobilization from a comparative perspective. This research agenda can explore how varying organizational foundations and political histories shape state strategies and the top-down mobilization repertoire. We also engage with studies of social movements that have solely focused on instances of mobilizing and organizing aimed at the state. Future research can compare how the strategies and practices of state mobilization compare to those of bottom-up mobilization, and how these distinct types of mobilization interact with each other. Furthermore, future research can also focus specifically on the mobilizing and organizing strategies employed by states in each specific sector, such as places of worship, university campuses, and state agencies.

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Data Availability Statement

The [dataset](#), codebook, and do-files for the empirical analysis in this article, along with the Online appendix, are available at Harvard Dataverse.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. <https://www.farsnews.ir/>
2. <https://www.tasnimnews.com/>
3. <https://basijnews.ir/>
4. <https://bachehayemasjed.ir/>
5. <https://www.ilna.ir/>
6. <https://www.isna.ir/>
7. <https://www.tasnimnews.com/>
8. <https://khairieh.com/>

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