

**The Contingency of Structures: Triggers
and the Social Geography of Revolutionary
Episodes in Iran 2018-2022**

Abstract

What drives the uneven geographic spread of revolutionary episodes? While structural approaches emphasize pre-existing fault lines, contingency approaches highlight emergent processes. We synthesize these perspectives, arguing that specific triggers shape a revolutionary episode's social geography by activating certain fault lines while leaving others dormant. Through a comparative analysis of three revolutionary episodes in Iran (2018–2022), each with a distinct trigger, we demonstrate how different triggers shape patterns of contention. Using spatial regression analysis of subnational protest data alongside socioeconomic and political variables, we show that a fuel price hike activated grievances in oil-producing areas, while a repressive event targeting a woman from an ethnic and religious minority mobilized protests in minority-populated districts and resonated with the educated class, amplifying demands for female autonomy. Our findings illustrate how triggers structure revolutionary mobilization, offering broader insights into the interaction between structural conditions and contingent events in contentious politics.

1. Introduction

The geographic expansion of contention plays a critical role in revolutionary mobilization, as it builds momentum to overthrow incumbent governments. A critical question arises: Why are certain regions more active than others during a revolutionary episode? Structural approaches suggest that preexisting regional conditions shape the dynamics of spatial diffusion (Markoff 1985; Mazur 2018; Xu et al. 2024), whereas contingency approaches emphasize the role of spontaneous, emergent dynamics in the development of a revolutionary cascade (Barrie 2023; Barrie and Ketchley 2018; Biggs 2005). Recent efforts have sought to reconcile this debate by specifying the distinct effects of structure and contingency in revolutionary mobilization (Beck et al. 2022; Beissinger 2022). Building on these discussions, this article presents a framework to explore the interplay between structure and contingency in the geographic expansion of revolutionary episodes at the subnational level.

We argue that triggers do more than unleash latent grievances or initiate emergent dynamics; they selectively activate specific fault lines while leaving others dormant, shaping the geographic spread of revolutionary episodes. Existing scholarship recognizes that multiple fault lines exist within societies and that political parties or social movement organizations typically translate these cleavages into collective action (Ganz 2010; Leon, Desai, and Tuğal 2015; Oberschall 1973). However, under authoritarian regimes, where repression weakens or eliminates these mediating organizations, triggers play a crucial role in activating fault lines (Ketchley and Barrie 2019).

In this paper, we categorize different types of triggers and develop hypotheses about their effects on various fault lines of contention. For instance, a repressive event targeting a member of an excluded ethnic group is more likely to mobilize protests in areas where that community resides, whereas a sudden fuel price hike is more likely to activate grievances tied to oil extraction, leading to intensified contention in oil-producing regions. Conversely, repressive events are less likely to

mobilize protests over economic issues like fuel prices, just as fuel price hikes are unlikely to spur mobilization in areas where ethnic exclusion is the dominant grievance. Thus, the nature of the trigger fundamentally shapes which grievances translate into revolutionary mobilization and where these movements take root.

To demonstrate this argument, we analyze three consecutive revolutionary episodes in Iran from 2017 to 2022. These episodes present Iran as a diverse case with multiple fault lines of contention and distinct triggers, making it an ideal setting for generating and testing hypotheses about the interaction between triggers, structures, and the social geography of revolutionary contention. More specifically, Iran serves as a valuable case study due to its characteristics as an oil-producing hybrid regime with an active middle class and a diverse ethnic and religious population—factors that research suggests heighten the likelihood of revolutionary episodes.

The relative stability of Iran's major contextual factors and political landscape across the three episodes, combined with the distinctiveness of each trigger, provides a unique opportunity to examine how different triggers activate specific fault lines and shape the geographic spread of revolutionary contention. To support our analysis, we compiled original protest data, subnational data on oil extraction and ethnicity, and a range of socioeconomic and political variables. Using spatial regression models for each episode, we compare variations in the structural predictors of protest, supplemented by in-depth case studies to trace the geographic expansion of contention in each instance.

The first episode in 2017-18 was characterized by protests initiated by hardliners within the regime, aimed at undermining the moderate administration then in power. Initially, protests were concentrated in districts with higher conservative vote proportions in the 2017 presidential election. However, the protests expanded across different geographic areas when the diaspora opposition

called for more widespread action. The second episode in 2019 was triggered by a sudden spike in gas prices, which directly ignited grievances related to oil production. This was reflected in our spatial regression analysis, where oil extraction emerged as a significant predictor of protest intensity for this episode. Notably, our results indicated a higher protest rate among Arabs—an excluded ethnic group with the highest concentration around oil and gas districts. No significant association was observed with other excluded groups, such as Kurds or Sunnis. The third episode in 2022 was catalyzed by the death of a Sunni Kurdish woman at the hands of the morality police in Tehran. This incident led to widespread mobilization across the country. Unlike previous episodes, Sunni and Kurdish populations emerged as significant predictors of mobilization, while oil extraction and other excluded ethnic groups were not. Furthermore, the educated population was a significant predictor of protest intensity in all three episodes, but its effect was most pronounced in the third episode. This aligns with the longstanding demand for female freedom and autonomy, a key issue for Iran's middle class over several decades. In each case, the specific trigger had a critical impact on the social geography of the revolutionary episodes, with this impact becoming increasingly apparent in the latter two episodes. Given that fault lines like class, ethnicity, religion, and natural resource extraction are prevalent globally, and triggers such as repressive events or fuel price hikes are common catalysts for revolutionary episodes, the case of Iran offers valuable insights into the interplay between structural preconditions and triggers in the study of revolutions.

2. Structure and Contingency in the Geographic Expansion of Revolutionary Episodes

A revolutionary episode, as defined by Mark Beissinger (2022), refers to a specific episode of mass mobilization against an established government, characterized by citizens' demands for regime change and substantial political or social transformations. Revolutionary episodes are a subset of the broader category of contentious episodes, which Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow (2015) define as

“bounded sequences of continuous interaction” involving collective claims related to government through extra-institutional means. To understand the trajectory of revolutionary episodes, it is essential to examine both the literature on revolution and the broader literature on contentious politics, including studies of social movements, protests, and civil wars.

The development of contentious and, in particular, revolutionary episodes is crucial in determining their outcomes. A key element in this evolution is the diffusion of revolutionary contention across geographic spaces. Research on social movements and protests has extensively examined the mechanism of diffusion, highlighting its significance in the power dynamics of these movements (Andrews and Biggs 2006; Soule 2022). The process by which contention expands involves extending its geographic scope. This expansion is not merely a physical spread; it indicates growth in the power and impact of social movements. Social movements gain strength from demonstrating their numbers, solidarity, and breadth of influence (Tilly and Wood 2009). The more widespread the contention, the greater the potential for these movements to influence the outcomes of contentious episodes. This concept is also evident in Beissinger's (2022) analysis of revolutionary episodes. His findings suggest that revolutionary movements that extend beyond the capital city are more likely to achieve short-term success compared to those confined within the capital. This observation highlights the relationship between the spread of contention and the achievement of revolutionary objectives, underscoring the strategic importance of geographic diffusion in the success of revolutionary episodes.

These observations prompt crucial questions about the geographic dynamics of revolutionary movements: Why do some regions participate in protests while others remain detached? What factors contribute to varying levels of protest activity in different areas? Two main approaches can be distinguished to address these questions. The first approach emphasizes the role of pre-existing structural conditions and historical precedents that may contribute to discontent,

provide resources for solidarity or highlight causes of government weaknesses. This perspective examines how long-standing economic, social, and political structures predispose certain regions to be more susceptible or resistant to revolutionary activity. The second approach focuses on contingency, investigating endogenous processes where information diffusion and emergent dynamics drive the expansion of rebellion, often independent of structural conditions. This view examines how spontaneous events, real-time communication, and dynamic social networks can catalyze movements that may not be predicted solely by structural analysis.

Recent scholarship integrates these perspectives, recognizing the interplay between structural forces and contingencies in shaping revolutionary episodes. Building on this synthesis, we argue that the influence of structural forces on the geographic diffusion of revolutionary episodes is contingent on the specific trigger of the episode. In the following sections, we outline structural and contingency approaches and present our framework, which synthesizes these perspectives to explain the social geography of revolutions.

2.1. The Structural Approach

The structural approach identifies factors such as demographic composition, economic disparities, political engagement levels, and historical precedents in different areas as potentially influencing their propensity to become hotbeds of revolutionary activity.

This approach, emphasizing the distinct characteristics of various areas and locations, aligns with structural explanations of revolutions (Goldstone 1993; Goodwin 2001; Skocpol 1979; Wickham-Crowley 1997). These theories propose that revolutions stem from structural changes and crises, suggesting that regional participation in revolutionary episodes may be attributed to unique contextual features. At the subnational level, John Markoff (1985) initially developed this analytical framework to analyze the social geography of rural rebellion during the French Revolution. More

recently, Xiaohong Xu and colleagues (2024) applied this approach to investigate the drivers of the Communist takeover in China at the subnational level.

Other studies have identified various structural fault lines that shape the social geography of revolutionary mobilization. These include economic underdevelopment (Barrie 2023), the presence of key revolutionary classes such as workers, peasants, intellectuals, or the middle class (Engels and Marx 1978; Huntington 1968, 1993; Kurzman and Leahey 2004; Wolf 1999), ethnic and religious exclusion (Cederman et al. 2010; Wimmer et al. 2009), natural resource extraction (Adunbi 2017; Asal et al. 2016; Hong and Yang 2020; Riofrancos 2020), previous patterns of repression (Rozenas and Zhukov 2019; Tezcür 2016), and state patronage (Mazur 2018). Regions characterized by these conditions are more likely to engage in revolutionary mobilization due to preexisting grievances and solidarities, which create fertile ground for collective action when contentious episodes emerge.

The structural approach outlined here shares affinities with the scholarship on cleavages, political parties, and electoral mobilization, particularly in Europe. In their influential work, Lipset and Rokkan (1967) argued that historical development patterns in Europe resulted in a set of cleavages and social divisions that shaped political party mobilization strategies. However, social movement scholars have questioned the direct impact of social divisions on movement mobilization. Earlier social movement research suggested that grievances are widespread (McAdam 1999; McCarthy and Zald 1977), and that mobilization results from movement organizations' and social movement entrepreneurs' efforts to frame and translate grievances into collective action (Benford and Snow 2000; Ganz 2010; Lu and Tao 2017; Snow, Vliegenthart, and Ketelaars 2018; Walker and Martin 2018). Recent scholarship has renewed attention to the role of grievances and threats in mobilization (Almeida 2018; Snow 2022). Similar to early social movement theories, the articulation perspective suggests that political parties play a more active role in reshaping and reforming existing

cleavages (De Leon, Desai, and Tuğal 2009; Leon et al. 2015). Like cleavages, we recognize that fault lines influence protest dynamics. However, we emphasize that in authoritarian regimes, where repression has weakened oppositional parties and organizations, specific triggers can activate fault lines, serving as catalysts in the absence of robust opposition networks.

2.2. The Contingency Approach

The contingency approach provides a distinct perspective from frameworks emphasizing structural factors in the spread of revolutionary waves. Over the past few decades, scholarship on contentious politics and revolutions has shifted focus from pre-existing structures to the dynamism, endogeneity, and emergent processes that occur during episodes of contention. Scholars have highlighted the indeterminacy of structures and how new collective identities, information flows, emotions, and relationships emerge during the progression of contention (Goodwin and Jasper 2004; Lawson 2019; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Zhang 2021).

This viewpoint posits that the generative and demonstrative power of protest can momentarily render structural conditions irrelevant. In essence, the contagious enthusiasm and inspiration derived from protests can inspire people to join the movement in other locations, even in the absence of structural preconditions typically deemed necessary for engagement in contention during more stable times (Beissinger 2002, 2007; Kurzman 2004; Oliver 1989).

This approach underscores the importance of temporal dynamics during a revolutionary episode. It suggests that the spread of the episode is largely self-contained, heavily influenced by how people in different locations receive and perceive information about on-going protests. As people witness the effectiveness, momentum, or symbolic significance of protests elsewhere, they may be inspired to take similar actions, regardless of their local structural conditions (Kuran 1995; Kurzman 2004). This model emphasizes the dynamic interactions and evolving perceptions that

occur during a revolution, rather than focusing solely on pre-existing conditions. It highlights the significant role of communication, media, brokers, and symbolic actions in influencing the trajectory of a revolutionary wave (Clarke 2014; Hassan 2024; Seguin 2015). The emotional and psychological impact of witnessing successful protests can foster a sense of possibility and urgency, prompting rapid and widespread mobilization that may not be fully explained by traditional structural factors.

The contingency approach acknowledges the potential for single events, such as focal points, to serve as turning points in revolutionary processes. A focal point is a moment in time that inspires collective action among numerous individuals, even in the absence of direct communication, due to its perceived appropriateness in the given circumstances. In this context, triggers serve as a type of focal point. Examples of focal points include events like stolen elections, which convey to potential contenders the extent of shared grievances, the likelihood of others joining the movement, or the vulnerability of the existing political structure to insurgency. In democratic regimes, social movement organizations often fulfill this function, facilitating collective action. However, under authoritarian rule, where severe repression weakens or eliminates traditional social movement organizations, focal points become crucial in addressing the coordination problem faced by challengers. These focal points effectively signal when and where to mobilize, compensating for the organizational void created by repressive political environments (Beissinger 2011; Ketchley and Barrie 2019; Tucker 2007).

The eventful conception of revolutions also helps us further theorize the significance of triggers. William Sewell (1996) argued that, at certain historical junctures, events have the power to transform large societal structures, as seen in his analysis of the capture of the Bastille during the French Revolution. Transformative events reveal the potential for insurgent collective action within a particular environment and mediate between long-term change processes and cycles of contention

(McAdam and Sewell 2001). The triggers of revolutionary episodes can be regarded as transformative events that activate grievances, solidarities, and perceptions of vulnerability within the system, thereby inducing collective action. This perspective aligns with sociological theories emphasizing the sequential impact of events, where “an individual action triggers a process of behavioral alignment, influencing some individuals to endorse the same line of conduct, thereby motivating others to follow suit” (Ermakoff 2015:79). Such theories have been instrumental in shaping major theories of collective action diffusion (Biggs 2005; Hedström 1994; Kuran 1991).

2.3. Synthetic Approaches

Recent scholarship seeks to integrate structural and contingency approaches, emphasizing that both operate simultaneously in shaping contentious episodes (Beck et al. 2022). This body of work highlights that while structures influence mobilization processes, they are indeterminate and subject to change through interactions among various agents (Zhang 2021). For example, the emergence of revolutionary episodes is often facilitated by certain structural preconditions that increase the likelihood of an outbreak. However, the actual occurrence of such episodes depends on dynamic interactions between government and opposition forces, as well as unforeseen events (Beissinger 2022; Parsa 2000).

Previous research on social movement diffusion has also integrated both structural and contingency approaches. This is achieved by incorporating pre-existing conditions and emergent processes within statistical analyses of contentious episodes, often examining their interactions (Andrews and Biggs 2006). Our approach is distinct in that we emphasize the origin of the episode, particularly its trigger, and how it activates specific contexts while ignoring others. Unlike other analyses, we are less concerned with the emergent processes that unfold during the episode, instead

focusing on the initial triggers and their immediate impacts. Table 1 summarizes our theoretical discussion thus far.

Table 1. Synthesizing Structural and Contingency Approaches to Revolutionary Episodes

Approaches	Key Argument	How This Paper Extends It
Structural Theories	Pre-existing economic, ethnic, and political cleavages determine protest geography.	Argues that these cleavages need activation by specific triggers.
Contingency Theories	Protest waves spread dynamically through information diffusion and spontaneous action.	Emphasizes that specific types of triggers shape who mobilizes and where.

2.4. Triggers and Contingency of Structures

We propose that the triggers of revolutionary episodes play a pivotal role in shaping their progression. Although previous scholarship has acknowledged triggers, their role remains undertheorized. In structural approaches, triggers unleash underlying structural tensions, while in contingency approaches, they initiate the emergent dynamics and processes that unfold during revolutionary episodes. In one notable exception, a historical account of the English Civil War distinguished between “long-run, underlying causes – the preconditions, which create a potentially explosive situation and can be analyzed on a comparative basis – and immediate, incidental factors – the precipitants, which trigger the outbreak and which may be nonrecurrent, personal, and fortuitous” (Stone 2017:9). However, subsequent scholarship has identified ambiguities in this approach, including the lack of a clear analytic framework to evaluate the relative importance of different causes within and across these categories, as well as the undertheorized relationship between long-term and short-term causes (Hall 1999; Zhang 2024).

We define a trigger as the event that initiates a contentious episode—in this case, a revolutionary episode. The first contentious actions in such episodes directly address the trigger, either by making claims related to it or targeting entities associated with it. This definition aligns with the episodic approach to analyzing contention and distinguishes triggers as discrete events rather than gradual processes of change. Common triggers for revolutionary episodes include repressive events (Davenport, Mueller, and Johnston 2005; Earl and Braithwaite 2022; Shultziner 2018) , such as Black Friday in the Maldives (2004), the Shi’a uprising in Iraq (1999), and the 2014 protests in Venezuela; sudden hikes in fuel or food prices (McCulloch et al. 2022; Natalini, Bravo, and Newman 2020; Vadlamannati and De Soysa 2020), as seen in the 2010 Kyrgyz Revolution and the 2004 Saffron Revolution in Myanmar; and abrupt economic hardships often theorized as disruptions of the quotidian , such as the 2001 uprising in Argentina and the 1997 unrest in Albania. Other triggers include institutional changes, such as attempts to amend constitutions, which fueled the 2014 Burkinabé uprising and the 2009 Niger constitutional crisis, as well as the 2011 uprising in Djibouti. Finally, elections marked by allegations of fraud (Kuntz and Thompson 2009; Tucker 2007) have also triggered revolutionary episodes, as seen in Serbia (2000), Georgia (2003), and Armenia (2008).¹

¹ We derived these categories and examples from coding 63 urban revolutionary episodes from 1990 to 2014 in Mark Beissinger’s (2022) dataset of revolutionary episodes. For each case, we analyzed secondary sources and news reports to identify the trigger and categorize it accordingly. We successfully identified triggers for the majority of episodes, and the categories referenced above were constructed based on both existing literature and our review of each episode’s accounts.

Table 2. Hypothesized Relationship Between Trigger Types and the Activation of Fault Lines

Trigger Type	Fault Lines of Contention Activated	Expected Social Geographies of Mobilization
Repressive Events	Grievances related to the victim's ethnic, religious, racial, gender, or class background.	Higher mobilization in areas with a higher concentration of the affected identity group, in regions where the group is politically organized, or in areas with pre-existing related demands.
Fuel Price Shock	Grievances tied to oil and gas extraction, including perceptions of economic exclusion and resource mismanagement.	Stronger mobilization in regions with oil and gas installations.
Contested Election	Political grievances related to fraud, electoral exclusion, or factional rivalries.	Mobilization follows electoral maps, with protests occurring in regions where opposition candidates had strong support or where the ruling faction has contested legitimacy.
Institutional Change	Political and social cleavages aligned with the proposed institutional shift (e.g., constitutional amendments, shifts in governance structures).	Mobilization in geographies corresponding to the affected constituencies, including regions historically aligned with the threatened or empowered political actors.
Economic Shock	Socioeconomic grievances aligned with class structure and political affiliations, particularly related to employment, wages, and inflation.	Higher mobilization in regions experiencing economic decline, high unemployment, or where opposition to economic policies is historically strong.

We argue that triggers can potentially activate specific sources of discontent and solidarity across various regions. Different triggers stimulate different contextual factors or structures within a society, resulting in diverse geographic forms and dynamics of revolutionary episodes. This perspective explains why certain sources of discontent are activated in a revolutionary episode while others are not. Societies typically harbor multiple contextual factors that could drive a revolution, but not all these structures are activated during a revolutionary episode.

Triggers activate fault lines by directly connecting to pre-existing grievances, impacting concentrated populations that share those grievances, and being clearly attributable to state actions. They ignite mobilization by generating moral shocks and outrage (Jasper 1997; Jasper and Poulsen 1995; Över 2021), signaling to individuals within affected populations that their grievances are widely shared and that others are ready to take action (Kuran 1998; Kurzman 2004). In many cases, prolonged exclusion and systemic injustice embed grievances into the identities of entire communities. When triggers resonate with these entrenched grievances, they transform these

identities into contentious ones, fostering collective action and mobilization (Tilly and Tarrow 2015; Viterna 2013).

In democratic contexts, triggers rarely lead to revolutionary mobilization. However, in autocratic regimes, mobilization can quickly escalate from addressing specific grievances to demanding fundamental political change. This escalation occurs because autocracies offer extremely limited political avenues, such as elections, for addressing grievances. In such regimes, any form of collective action is often labeled as treason or a threat to national security. Consequently, as framing scholarship suggests, mobilization around frames like ethnoreligious exclusion, economic hardship, or other grievances tends to converge with pre-existing frames advocating revolutionary regime change, thereby amplifying the scope and intensity of the mobilization (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow et al. 1986).

We argue that perception of events varies across different communities, resulting in varying degrees of mobilization across different geographies. The transformative potential of events is determined by the importance assigned to them in the aftermath, rather than the events themselves. Accordingly, scholars are encouraged to focus on how different communities perceive these events in their aftermath (McAdam and Sewell 2001), which in this paper we define as the next hours or days. Building on framing scholarship, which highlights how frames resonate differently with various audiences (Snow, Vliegenthart, and Ketelaars 2018), and the literature on political opportunity and threats, which suggests that collective actors often perceive shifts in political contexts differently (Kadivar 2013), we extend these insights to triggers. Specifically, we argue that the resonance of triggers with different communities mirrors these dynamics, as distinct triggers evoke varied responses depending on the social, cultural, and political contexts of the affected populations.

Table 2 presents a framework for understanding how different types of triggers activate specific fault lines, shaping the geographic spread of revolutionary contention. For instance, repressive events targeting members of excluded ethnic or religious communities are more likely to ignite mobilization in regions where those groups reside. Similarly, gender-based repression can activate existing grievances related to women's rights, while fuel price hikes tend to mobilize populations in oil-producing areas where economic exclusion and resource mismanagement are salient concerns. Contested elections often translate pre-existing electoral fault lines into sites of revolutionary mobilization, while broader economic shocks drive contention in regions suffering from economic decline and unemployment. Table 2 summarizes these expected relationships.

The influence of a trigger on a revolutionary episode is not necessarily sustained throughout its entirety. The duration and intensity of a trigger's impact depend on whether a scale shift occurs during the episode. A scale shift happens when new actors enter the mobilization, bringing additional networks, resources, and symbols that can expand, redirect, or even neutralize the effects of the initial trigger.

The Tunisian Revolution of 2010–11 illustrates this process. The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a fruit vendor in the underdeveloped southern town of Sidi Bouzid, initially triggered protests centered on economic hardship and poverty. These protests were largely localized, involving Bouazizi's family, friends, and nearby towns. However, as the movement progressed, broader demands—such as regime change—emerged. This escalation occurred as new actors, including unionists and bloggers, deliberately expanded the episode's reach beyond economic grievances (Kadivar 2022).

Christopher Barrie's (2023) subnational analysis of Tunisia's revolutionary diffusion further demonstrates this shift. Initially, underdevelopment strongly predicted the spread of protests.

However, as new actors mobilized in larger cities, particularly the capital, Tunis, the relationship between underdevelopment and protest reversed. The early trigger—government repression and economic hardship—activated grievances in marginalized southern regions. Yet, as the episode evolved, the mobilization expanded beyond its original base, driven by actors who reframed the movement’s objectives.

The changing effects of triggers do not diminish their significance. Scholarship on contingency emphasizes that contentious mobilization is volatile, with escalation and de-escalation shaped by interactions among protesters, third parties, and unfolding events. While the early stages of a revolutionary episode are crucial for setting its trajectory, the dynamics of mobilization evolve as new actors and narratives emerge. Nonetheless, the initial expansion patterns often shape the episode’s foundation, influencing later developments even as the movement shifts in focus and geography.

We have thus far examined how triggers influence the effects of pre-existing structures, but how do structures shape the salience and impact of triggers? Structural factors play a crucial role in determining which triggers resonate most within a given society. For instance, the level of democracy and civil liberties affects the likelihood of repressive events sparking revolutionary contention—such events are more likely to serve as triggers in highly repressive regimes. Similarly, in societies with entrenched ethnic and religious exclusion, repression against marginalized communities is more likely to activate mobilization along those fault lines. In countries where oil and gas extraction are central to the economy, sudden fuel price hikes are particularly potent triggers, as they directly tap into existing grievances over resource distribution and economic inequality.

However, while structures shape the likelihood that certain events will resonate, they do not determine the exact type or timing of triggers. The emergence of specific triggers is contingent on the often unpredictable interactions among individual and collective actors, as well as the broader political and social context. Even within the same structural landscape, different triggers can activate distinct grievances at different moments, underscoring the dynamic interplay between structural conditions and contingent events in shaping revolutionary episodes.

3. Empirical Strategy

This study examines three consecutive revolutionary episodes in Iran as its empirical case. Iran, as a middle-income, oil-producing country with a hybrid regime, multiethnic society, and expanding middle class, exhibits characteristics that increase its likelihood of experiencing revolutionary episodes compared to countries without these features. Cross-national and individual-level analyses indicate that hybrid authoritarian regimes are more susceptible to revolutionary upheavals than other types of autocratic or democratic regimes. Furthermore, the middle class has played a pivotal role in recent urban revolutions of the 20th century (Beissinger 2022), while ethnic fractionalization and exclusion have been major drivers of violent conflicts (Wimmer et al. 2009).

Notwithstanding the general correlation between oil production and lower rates of cross-national protest and revolutionary episodes (Beissinger 2022; Kadivar and Caren 2016; Smith 2004), fluctuations in oil prices and local grievances related to oil extraction have frequently been sources of discontent and unrest in oil-producing countries (Ishak and Farzanegan 2022; von Uexkull et al. 2024; Vadlamannati and De Soysa 2020). The combination of these factors creates a unique socio-political landscape in Iran, making it an ideal case study for examining the dynamics of revolutionary episodes and understanding the interplay between structural conditions and specific triggers that catalyze widespread mobilization.

This analysis examines three revolutionary episodes in Iran from 2017-18, 2019, and 2022, selected for their occurrence within a relatively short time frame, ensuring that they unfolded under similar overarching social structures. Key factors such as ethnic and class compositions, the electoral landscape, and the role of oil and gas extraction remained relatively stable during this period. While these episodes shared notable features—being largely leaderless, uniformly calling for regime change, and ultimately facing state repression—each was triggered by a distinct event, leading to unique patterns of geographic expansion.

These characteristics make Iran well-suited for a diverse-case comparative approach to generate and test hypotheses (George and Bennett 2005; Gerring 2006; Lange 2012). The case allows for both synchronic and diachronic comparisons: within each episode, we assess variation in the activation of fault lines related to class, ethnicity, religion, and oil extraction, while across episodes, we examine how different triggers activate or deactivate specific fault lines. By treating each episode as a counterfactual for the others, we explore questions such as: How would the trajectory of contention have differed if, instead of a sudden fuel price hike, the trigger had been violence against members of an excluded ethnic group, and vice versa?

To facilitate this comparison, we first provide a narrative overview of the context preceding each revolutionary episode, identifying the specific trigger and outlining the episode's progression. Next, we analyze subnational protest data, incorporating political and socioeconomic indicators, to illustrate the distinct patterns of geographic expansion that emerged across these episodes. Finally, we conduct separate regression analyses for each episode, demonstrating how the unique triggers produced varying correlations between protest activities and key contextual factors. This approach enables a comprehensive comparison of the episodes, highlighting the influence of specific triggers on mobilization patterns.

4. Fault Lines of Contention in Iran

Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, Iran has experienced the occurrence and evolution of different contentious mobilizations. These varying forms include revolutionary mobilization, protest mobilization, electoral mobilization, state-led mobilization, and war mobilization, among others. Since the 1979 revolution, the level of mobilization in these forms have remained elevated in Iran, with ebbs and flows over time. Specifically, since 2017, the country has witnessed nationwide revolutionary episodes, characterized by tens of thousands of protesters taking to the streets, clashing with security forces, and demanding regime change (Abrahamian 1982; Kurzman 2004).

Existing scholarship on Iranian politics and contention highlights key configurations that shape the political dynamics in the country, potentially influencing contentious and revolutionary mobilization. Iran operates as an autocratic regime with factional politics and competitive elections among regime insiders (Ayatollahi Tabaar 2018; Keshavarzian 2005). The Islamic Republic of Iran, as an autocratic regime, has utilized repression to subjugate dissidents and various excluded social, religious, and ethnic groups (Parsa 2020). As a middle-income country, Iran is characterized by diverse social classes, including a middle class that advocates for social and political freedom (Bahrani 2016; Bashiriyeh 2000). The country also has various ethnic and religious groups that have experienced different levels of inclusion and exclusion, participating in diverse forms of mobilization (Tohidi 2009). Furthermore, as an oil-producing nation, Iran's politics have been significantly shaped by oil extraction and revenues over the past century (Ehsani 2017; Jafari 2018; Smith 2004). The analysis that follows will examine four fault lines of contention closely tied to the three revolutionary episodes under study.

4.1. Factional Politics in a Hybrid Regime

Iran is a hybrid authoritarian regime where non-electoral institutions—such as the Supreme Leader, the Guardian Council, the Judiciary, and the Armed Forces—wield greater influence than elected

bodies such as presidency and parliament (Kamrava 2023; Keshavarzian 2005). Elections are competitive but limited to regime insiders, primarily dividing reformist/moderate and conservative/hardliner factions.

Since the 1990s, electoral mobilization has been a key mode of political contention, particularly for reformists who have built coalitions with marginalized groups, such as the youth, middle class, and ethnic minorities, advocating for political liberalization. However, moments of perceived electoral fraud or suppression have triggered mass protests, such as the 2009 Green Movement (Alimagham 2020).

4.2. Middle Class

Beyond the regime and political organizations, social groups—particularly the middle class—have played a crucial role in mobilization and political change in Iran. The middle class has been at the forefront of demands for political rights and civil liberties, engaging both electorally and through street protests. The rise of the reform movement in the 1990s and the 2009 electoral uprising were closely tied to middle-class aspirations for democratization and social liberalization. This class has consistently championed civil liberties, opposing government-imposed restrictions, particularly those targeting women and youth, as part of a broader struggle for personal freedom and autonomy (Bahrani 2016; Daghighaleh 2018; Farzanegan and Azizimehr 2017).

Given the Islamic Republic's restrictions on women's clothing and public presence, women's freedom and autonomy have been central demands of the educated class. In 1979, fearing that the Islamist government would impose restrictions on women, middle-class women staged public protests in Tehran, but their demonstrations were swiftly suppressed alongside other opposition to the new regime's policies. In the following decades, mostly educated women engaged in everyday resistance, a form of "nonmovement" (Bayat 2013; Shahrokni 2019), by defying dress

codes in their daily lives despite state harassment and crackdowns. Women's rights have also been a key issue in electoral politics, with reformist factions advocating greater freedoms while conservatives enforce traditional gender roles.

4.3. Ethnicity

Over the past century, ethnic groups, like social classes, have emerged as key collective actors in both electoral and contentious mobilization in Iran. The country is home to multiple ethnolinguistic groups, including Fars, Turk, Caspian, Lor, Kurd, Arab, and Baluch. Power in the Islamic Republic is concentrated among Farsi speakers, while Kurds, Arabs, and Baluch remain significantly underrepresented in the political elite (Elling 2013a; Saleh 2013). According to the Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) Dataset, Fars speakers dominate executive power, with Azeri Turks as junior partners, whereas Kurds, Arabs, Baluch, and Turkmen experience political discrimination (Vogt et al. 2015). Socioeconomic disparities also persist, with lower literacy rates in Kurdish, Lor, and Baluch districts, while Farsi-speaking areas fare better (Kadivar and Khani 2023).

Iran's ethnic groups have long mobilized in elections, advocating for greater rights and recognition. Excluded groups such as Kurds, Baluch, Arabs, Lurs, and Turks have historically supported reformist candidates, seeking improved political and socioeconomic conditions, whereas Fars-majority regions have leaned conservative (see the appendix for auxiliary analysis).

Beyond electoral mobilization, ethnic groups have engaged in both unarmed protests and armed insurgencies. Over the past decade, Kurdish, Arab, and Baluch armed groups have clashed with the state, while widespread protests in Kurdish, Turk, Arab, and Baluch regions have denounced ethnic exclusion, discrimination, and state violence (Aghajanian 1983; Elling 2013b; Saleh 2013; Tezcür and Asadzade 2019).

Among these groups, Arabs have a uniquely close relationship with oil extraction. Long before oil was discovered in Iran, Arabs inhabited oil-rich lands. Since extraction began, first under British control and later under Iran's National Oil Company, Arabs have remained excluded from decision-making and economic benefits. Their narratives of exclusion often emphasize how oil wealth is extracted from their lands while they continue to suffer from economic marginalization (Saleh 2013).

4.4. Religion

Iran, a predominantly Shi'i country, is also home to diverse religious minorities, including Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, Bahá'ís, and Sunnis. While the Islamic Republic officially recognizes all except the Bahá'ís—who face severe state persecution—Sunnis constitute the largest minority. The Sunni community has a strong ethnic dimension, comprising mostly Baluchis, Kurds, and Turkmens. While Baluchis and Turkmens are predominantly Sunni, Kurds include both Shi'i and Sunni adherents.

Sunnis in Iran experience systemic political and economic discrimination, with Sunni-majority districts generally poorer and less developed than Shi'a areas. These grievances have shaped electoral politics, with Sunni voters often backing reformist candidates in hopes of securing greater political and socioeconomic rights (Elling 2013b; Saleh 2013; Tezcür and Asadzade 2019). In addition to electoral campaigns, armed insurgent groups have attempted to represent the grievances of the Sunni population over the past four decades.

4.5. Oil Extraction

Oil production has been a defining factor in Iran's relations with global powers and its domestic state-society dynamics. The nationalization of Iran's oil industry in 1951 triggered an oil embargo and a U.S.- and U.K.-backed coup that reestablished Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's dictatorial

rule. This event fueled anti-American sentiment, contributing to the 1979 revolution and the U.S. embassy seizure. Since then, Iran has faced recurring U.S. sanctions on its oil exports (Abrahamian 2013).

Oil revenues have been central to Iran's economy, funding development, clientelism, and repression—hallmarks of a rentier state. Public discourse frequently revolves around oil revenues, with fuel subsidies and their potential cuts being key policy debates (Farzanegan, Khabbazan, and Sadeghi 2016; Farzanegan and Krieger 2019; Mahdavy 1970).

At the subnational level, oil production has driven both development and grievances over resource allocation and environmental degradation (Ehsani 2003; Mahdavi 2015). Oil-rich regions have seen labor unrest and local protests against oil companies, reflecting frustrations over economic inequalities, pollution, and insufficient investment in local infrastructure (Elling 2015). These tensions highlight the complex interplay between resource wealth and social stability in Iran.

5. Recurring Revolutionary Episodes in an Authoritarian Regime

5.1. Dey Protests 2017-18

Between December 28, 2017, and January 7, 2018, Iran witnessed the Dey protests, marking the broadest geographic wave of dissent since the 1979 revolution. Though daily participation remained in the tens of thousands, the movement featured slogans directly challenging the Islamic Republic's leadership.

The protests began as a hardliner-orchestrated effort to undermine President Hassan Rouhani, who had won re-election against hardliner Ebrahim Raisi in 2017. Rouhani's first term (2013–2017) had seen economic improvement following the nuclear deal with global powers, and conservatives sought to channel economic grievances against his administration. However, protesters quickly escalated their demands to target the entire regime, shifting the movement's trajectory. Opposition

diaspora groups amplified calls to action through social media, prompting government crackdowns on Telegram and Instagram.

Initially, protests were concentrated in districts that had overwhelmingly supported hardliner candidates. On the first day, five districts participated—four in the hardliner stronghold of Khorasan, where Raisi had performed well in 2017.² However, as opposition networks mobilized online, the movement spread beyond these conservative areas.

Despite government suppression, the Dey protests had lasting political consequences. They introduced new contentious tactics resembling those seen in the Arab Spring and color revolutions (Ketchley 2017). The episode also weakened the reformist agenda, as reformist politicians distanced themselves from the protests, further eroding their credibility.

Notably, this period also saw the first public protests against the compulsory hijab. In Tehran, Vida Movahhed, a young middle-class woman, removed her headscarf and waved it on a stick, inspiring similar acts of defiance. While women had long resisted hijab mandates in private, Movahhed's protest marked the issue's entry into the public sphere (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2023).

Two subnational studies have analyzed the Dey protests. Kadivar et al. (2024) examined the role of online mobilization, highlighting digital platforms' impact on the protests' spread. Raisi's (2021) focused on contextual factors shaping the movement's geographic expansion. Given our focus on district-level variations, Raisi's (2021) framework aligns with our research. However, we rely on the dataset from Kadivar et al. (2024) due to its comprehensive documentation, even as our findings diverge from Raisi's conclusions.

² The five districts are Mashhad, Kashmar, Shahroud, Neyshabour, and Yazd. The conservative vote share in these districts respectively were 55, 59, 55, 55, and 26%. The average conservative vote in the country in this election was 42%.

5.2. 2019 Aban Protests

Following the Dey protests, Iran's economic crisis deepened due to a currency devaluation in 2018, exacerbated by the U.S. withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal and the reinstatement of sanctions targeting Iran's oil and banking sectors. Amid this downturn, the government abruptly announced a fuel subsidy cut on November 15, 2019, leading to a 200% increase in gas prices. The announcement triggered widespread protests, starting at gas stations and quickly spreading across cities. Demonstrators voiced outrage not only over fuel prices but also broader grievances against the political structure, including chants against the Islamic Republic, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and the Revolutionary Guards.

The government responded with a severe crackdown, using live ammunition and mass arrests. Amnesty International reported over 300 protester fatalities (Amnesty International 2022). A nationwide internet blackout, imposed on November 16 for six days, coincided with the suppression of unrest. Like the Dey protests, the Aban protests lasted about a week, remaining leaderless and unaffiliated with political or social organizations. However, the violent repression had lasting effects, fueling opposition-led campaigns to boycott the 2021 presidential election, which saw the lowest voter turnout since 1980.

This study provides the first subnational analysis of protest frequency using original data, focusing on the relationship between oil extraction, ethnicity, and religion. Since the trigger was a fuel price hike, we expect higher protest frequencies in oil and gas-producing districts. Although the price increase was nationwide, oil reserves have historically been concentrated in districts with large Arab populations, particularly in Khuzestan province. Arabs in these regions have long articulated grievances over their exclusion from the economic benefits of oil wealth, viewing oil extraction as a key factor in their political and economic marginalization (Saleh 2013). This perceived injustice has fueled tensions with the central government, as well as separatist movements. Arabs cite discrimination in employment, particularly in the oil sector, where Persian workers receive preferential treatment, exacerbating poverty and unemployment in Arab communities. In comparison to neighboring Arab nations, these disparities have intensified demands for economic and political enfranchisement.

During the 2019 protests, grievances over oil extraction became especially pronounced in oil-producing cities like Mahshahr, a major petrochemical hub in southwest Iran. The city witnessed intense protests and a brutal government crackdown, resulting in dozens of deaths. Residents, frustrated by pollution and economic exclusion, compared their impoverished conditions to the privileged status of oil company employees. Mahshahr's significant Arab population played a prominent role in the protests and faced severe repression. Videos from Mahshahr captured protestors speaking Arabic, and an analysis of those killed showed that nearly all were of Arab origin.

Despite these dynamics, the brief 10-day duration of the episode limited the articulation of oil-related grievances in Arab-majority and oil-producing regions (see the appendix for a case study on Mahshahr). There were no significant structural changes between the Dey and Aban protests to explain the activation of oil extraction and Arab identity as key fault lines. Oil production patterns remained stable, with high correlation coefficients between flare volumes in 2017 and 2018 (0.97) and between 2018 and 2019 (0.92). Similarly, patterns of ethnoreligious exclusion persisted, with reports from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (2018) documenting continued discrimination against Arabs, Azerbaijani Turks, Baluchis, Kurds, and Turkmen. Repression of activists and civil society remained widespread, leaving no space for new social movement organizations. Thus, the protests' geographic and demographic patterns were shaped by the trigger—fuel price hikes—rather than by structural transformations (Amnesty International 2019; Human Rights Watch 2018).

5.3. Amini Protests 2022

In August 2022, Iran witnessed a revolutionary episode distinguished by its resilience and broad participation. The catalyst was the death of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Sunni Kurdish woman, in the custody of the morality police for allegedly violating hijab laws. Initially sparking protests in Kurdish regions, the movement quickly spread nationwide, lasting over 14 weeks and marking a significant shift in public dissent.

This article presents the first subnational analysis of these protests, emphasizing how the trigger—state violence against Amini—activated three major fault lines of contention. First, women's rights and bodily autonomy, long central to middle-class aspirations, took center stage, with middle-class women leading protests under the slogan *Woman, Life, Freedom*. This framing garnered global attention, aligning with international civil society priorities. Our subnational analysis and neighborhood-level studies in Tehran confirm that protests were strongest in more educated

districts, where grievances over state control of women's autonomy have been longstanding (Asadzade 2024).

Second, Amini's Kurdish and Sunni identities intensified mobilization in Kurdish and Sunni regions, marking a clear departure from the 2019 protests, which were shaped by grievances over oil extraction. Civil society groups in Kurdistan immediately condemned Amini's killing, framing it as part of broader state repression against Kurdish women. At her funeral, Kurdish slogans gained prominence, and exiled Kurdish parties called for strikes and protests, reinforcing ethnic identity as a key mobilizing factor. Protesters widely referred to Amini by her Kurdish name, *Zhina*, as an act of defiance against cultural marginalization (Azizi 2024; Kurdistan Teacher Association (Saqqiz & Ziviyeh) 2022; Nishtmanijoan 2022b, 2022a, 2022c).

The protests also resonated among Iran's Baluch community, the country's largest Sunni minority. Within ten days of Amini's death, Baluch activists amplified reports of a police officer's sexual assault of a Baluch girl, fueling calls for protests. Sunni clergy emerged as protest leaders, voicing grievances over ethnic and religious exclusion (Halwash 2022; rasadbalochistan 2022). Friday prayers became focal points for mass demonstrations, culminating in the September 30 *Zabedan Massacre*, when security forces killed dozens of unarmed protesters. This crackdown reinforced perceptions of systemic discrimination against Sunnis and ethnic minorities (Dehghanpisheh 2022; Wintour 2022).

No significant changes in structural conditions or political organization occurred between the 2019 and 2022 episodes. Patterns of oil extraction remained stable (as reflected in high flare volume correlations from 2018-2022), and reports from human rights organizations continued to document entrenched discrimination against Arabs, Kurds, Baluchis, and other minorities. Political repression also remained constant, with little room for new social movement organizations to emerge (Amnesty International 2020, 2021; Human Rights Watch 2020, 2022).

A competing explanation suggests that the 2021 presidential election played a crucial role in mobilizing Kurds, Sunnis, and the educated middle class. The exclusion of reformist candidates may have led these groups, who previously participated in elections, to shift toward street protests. While partially valid, this argument has notable shortcomings. First, Baluchis and Turkmen—also who voted for reformists—did not mobilize at the same levels. Second, when Arabs in Khuzestan launched protests in 2021 over environmental grievances, neither Kurds, Sunnis, nor the middle class joined, indicating that political disillusionment alone was insufficient to trigger cross-group mobilization. Third, this explanation does not account for why Arabs, who had actively participated in previous anti-regime protests, were largely absent in 2022 or why oil-related grievances, prominent in 2019, were not activated in 2022.

Our findings align with Iranian social scientists' interpretations of the 2022 episode. Sociologist Daghighaleh (2023) observed that protests unfolded across three distinct arenas—Tehran, Kurdistan, and Baluchistan—each with its own grievances. He described *Zhina* as a convergence of multiple layers of oppression: as a woman, she symbolized patriarchy's marginalization of women; as a young person, she embodied generational resistance; as a Kurd, she represented ethnic exclusion; and as a Sunni, she highlighted religious marginalization. The fact that she was killed in Tehran, Iran's political center, amplified her death's significance.

These findings underscore how distinct triggers activate different fault lines of contention. Unlike economic or oil-related grievances, state violence against Amini resonated most with women, Kurds, and Sunnis, shaping the protests' social geography and distinguishing them from previous revolutionary episodes.

Table 3 summarizes our description of the main trigger and fault lines of contention across the three revolutionary episodes in Iran, 2017-2022.

Table 3. Triggers and the Activation of Fault Lines in Iran's Revolutionary Episodes

Episode	Trigger	Main Fault Lines and Geographic Patterns
2017-18 Dey	Hardliner-led protests turned anti-regime	Initially in conservative districts, later expanding to more educated areas and highly populated districts.
2019 Aban	Fuel price hike	Concentrated in oil-producing regions, Arab-majority areas, and some educated districts, with broader participation in densely populated areas.
2022 Amini	Death of a Kurdish woman	Strongest mobilization in Kurdish and Sunni regions, with the highest participation in educated districts and highly populated urban areas.

6. Quantitative Data

6.1. Protest

Scholars of social movements and protests have traditionally relied on newspaper data to document protest events. However, this approach is problematic in repressive regimes where press coverage is limited due to censorship and governmental repression. To circumvent these challenges, this study utilized a diverse range of online sources for each episode, including oppositional news sites, human rights websites operating from outside Iran, and official sources from within the country. Many diaspora sources incorporated videos taken by protestors, which were either sent directly to these websites or uploaded to platforms such as YouTube.

Data collection for all three episodes commenced within days of the initial protests, reflecting the evolving online media landscape in Iran during these periods. Our objective was to comprehensively capture all protests occurring at the time of analysis. The government's methods of online censorship varied across these periods. For example, during the first episode, the government's censorship efforts evolved from targeting specific opposition digital media channels to blocking certain platforms. In contrast, the second episode saw a complete shutdown of the internet across the country. By the third episode, the government's censorship tactics remained consistent,

drawing from a robust arsenal of measures developed in previous episodes. We provide more detailed information about the protest data for each period below, highlighting the dynamics of the protests and the challenges of documenting them in a constrained media environment.

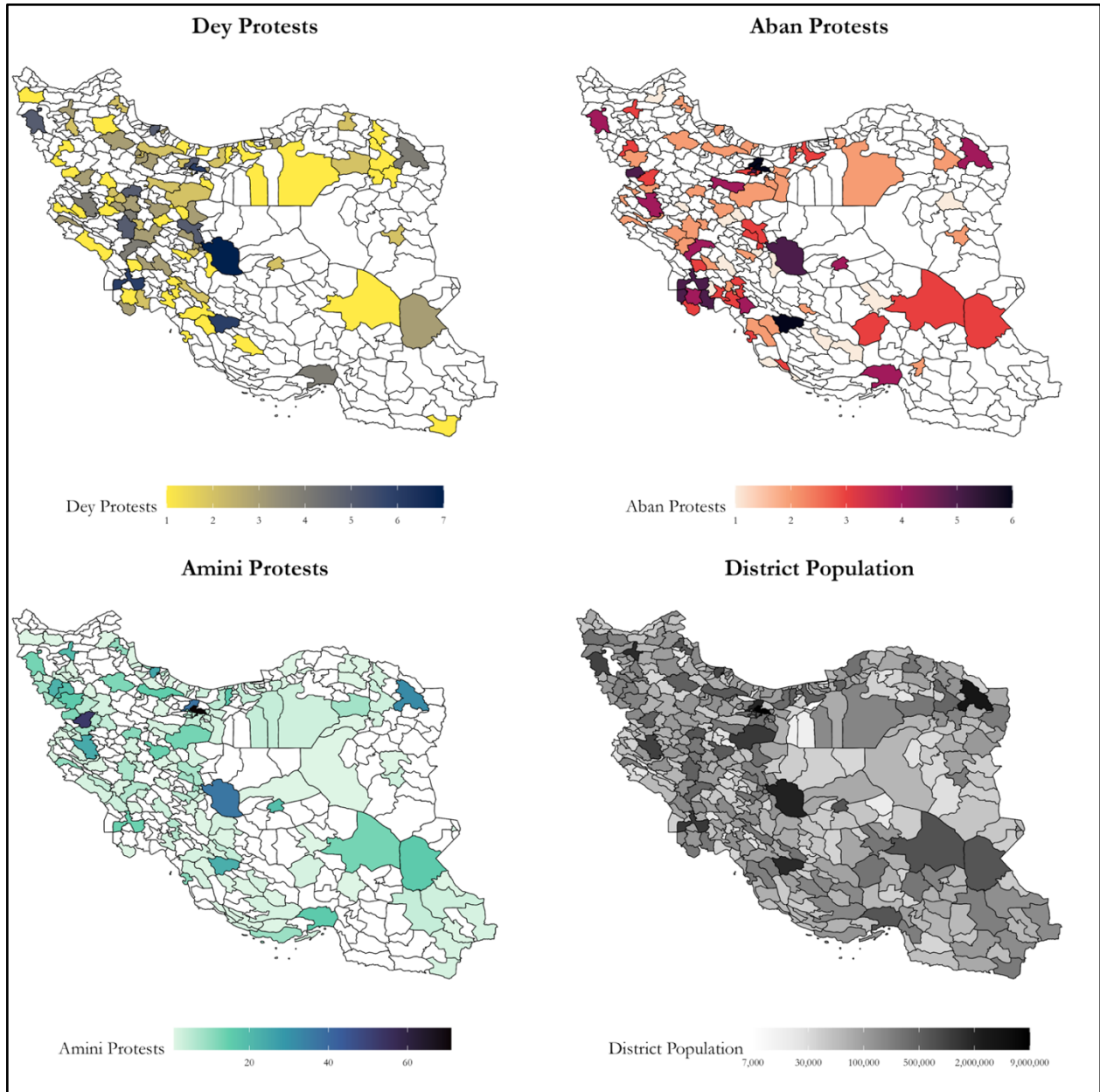
6.1.1. Dey Protests: Our analysis of the Dey protests of 2017-18 relies on subnational data from Kadivar et al. (2024). This dataset combines protest videos recorded by participants with reports from various news and online sources. It includes 318 unique videos and supplementary news reports, documenting 216 protest days across 96 districts over a 10-day period.

6.1.2. Aban Protests: To gather our Aban protest data, we employed a multi-source approach, aggregating information from various news media outlets and videos that documented the timing and location of protest events. Specifically, we utilized the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), which is a government-affiliated news agency, along with five independent and oppositional websites and news agencies (Hrana, BBC Persian, Iran International, Radio Farda, & Vahid Online). Additionally, we included videos captured by protestors and shared on social media platforms. These videos, amounting to a total of 1,214, were subsequently collected, thoroughly fact-checked, and cataloged for public use by human rights activists. By analyzing these diverse news sources and videos, we identified 244 distinct protest events occurring across 98 districts.

6.1.3. Amini Protests: For the 2022 episode, we compiled an original dataset which was derived from the coverage of protests on opposition websites, social media channels, BBC Persian, Iran International, Hrana, and Vahid Online. Our analysis of 5,576 news stories, covering the period from September 16, 2022 (Mahsa Amini's funeral) to December 8, 2022 (the last day of countrywide protests), identified 3,248 protest days across 126 districts. This episode saw the broadest scope of protest activity, including, uniquely for this episode, several strikes by blue-collar workers and businesses. However, our dataset focuses exclusively on public gatherings, as independently verifying strikes and participant numbers was not feasible. This ensures consistency in the data

across all three episodes. For analytical purposes, we aggregated protest occurrences at the district level, providing a comparative view of protest dynamics across different periods of unrest (See Figure 1. for the map of these protests).

Figure 1. The Map of Three Revolutionary Episodes in Iran 2018-2022



Note: Figure 1 presents the spatial distribution of three distinct protest episodes, overlaid with a map of district-level population data. This visualization conveys a clear comparison between the incidence of protests and the population density across various districts in Iran.

6.2. Structural Factors

To dissect the influence of contextual factors on protest activity across different episodes in Iran, our study integrates several key variables:

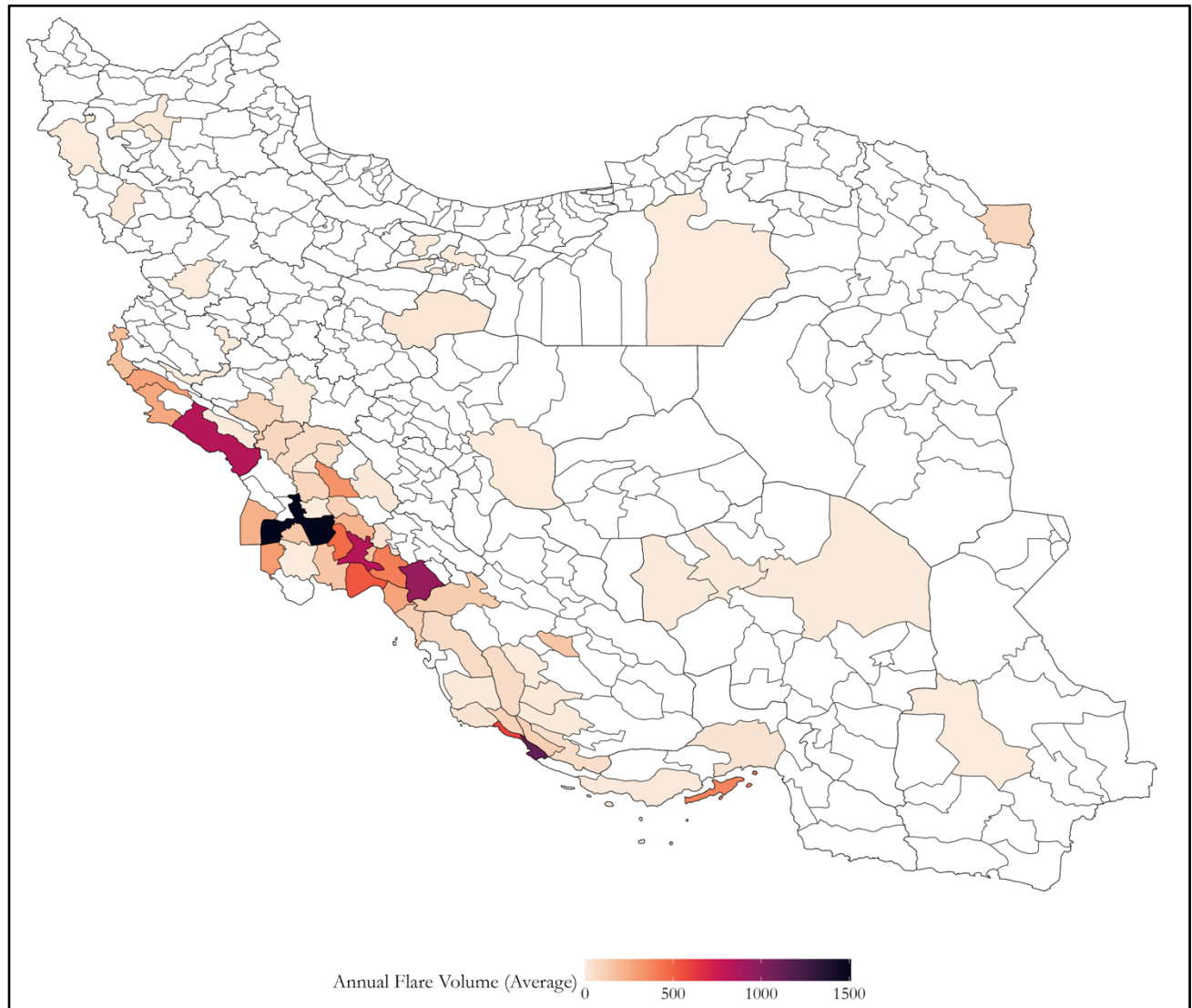
6.2.1. Oil extraction: We estimate the impact of oil and gas extraction and refinement in each district utilizing the volume of gas flares as a proxy. This choice is driven by two primary considerations. First, subnational-level data on the volume of oil production in Iran is unavailable. Second, even if such data were accessible, it would not adequately capture the quality of production, which directly correlates with environmental damages like air and water pollution — significant sources of local discontent. Given these constraints and the theoretical relevance, we assert that flare volume is the best available measure to approximate the volume, quality, and environmental consequences of oil and gas production at the subnational level.

To calculate the flare volume, we rely on data from the World Bank’s Global Gas Flaring Reduction Partnership (GGFR) and the Payne Institute for Public Policy at the Colorado School of Mines. This partnership provides annual data on approximate gas flare volumes at specific point locations. These estimates are derived from heat detected via the infrared band onboard the VIIRS satellite, operated by the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The detected heat, which closely correlates with the volume of gas burned, enables an approximate calculation of gas flare volume.

To further refine this data, we spatially align all point locations of gas flares with the corresponding Iranian district. For offshore locations, we include gas flare points within 10km of the nearest district to account for the potential impact of airborne particles on nearby residents. However, flares located more than 10km offshore are excluded from our analysis, based on the assumption that particle dilution at these distances sufficiently minimizes environmental impacts on land. Finally, we aggregate the total gas flare volume for each district, facilitating a detailed analysis

of the environmental footprint of oil and gas activities across different regions (see Figure 2. for the map of annual flares across the Iranian districts).

Figure 2. Average Annual Flare in Iran



Note: Figure 2 presents the spatial distribution of gas flare volumes across districts in Iran. Darker colors represent higher volumes.

6.2.2. Ethnicity: Incorporating ethnicity and religion into our analysis presents significant challenges due to data scarcity, a direct consequence of the Iranian government's treatment of these

subjects as security issues. The government's reluctance to release detailed data on the geographic distribution and demographic characteristics of ethnic and religious minorities severely limits the availability of reliable, up-to-date information. This data scarcity poses a unique challenge to researchers attempting to understand the sociopolitical dynamics of Iran, particularly in the context of protest mobilization and participation.

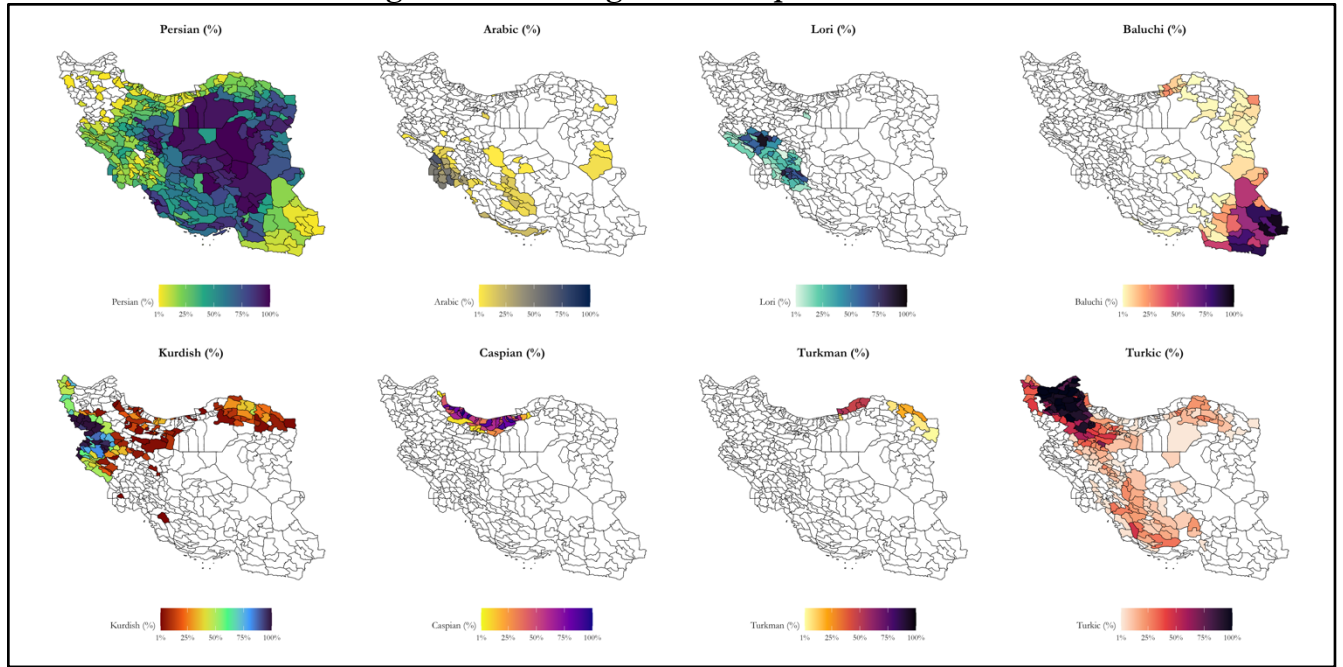
For the ethnicity variable, despite these challenges, our methodology involves a detailed analysis of the available data on the subnational distribution of ethnolinguistic groups. This analysis utilizes a unique dataset derived from a survey conducted alongside the 1986 census (Hourcade et al. 1998). This dataset provides valuable insights into Iran's rural linguistic landscape by documenting the percentages of village subdivisions (Deh) within the village (Dehestan) that predominantly speak one of Iran's main languages: Farsi, Turkic, Caspian, Lori, Kurdish, Baluchi, and Arabic. However, it is essential to note that this dataset lacks specificity regarding the exact village subdivisions associated with each language, necessitating an assumption that all subdivisions within a village are of equal population size.

To estimate the number of language speakers within each village and gauge the linguistic composition of the rural portion of each district, we reference the census data on village population sizes. By applying the identified percentages of language-speaking villages to these population figures, we can estimate the number of speakers for each language within the rural segments of districts. Subsequently, to extend our analysis to encompass entire districts, we determined the share of the rural population within each district speaking a particular language. This proportion serves as a proxy to estimate the overall percentage of speakers of each language across full districts. Figures 3 displays maps of language speakers and the intersection of Arabs and gas flares across Iranian districts, respectively.

One limitation of the data is that it aggregates subdivisions of a language. This does not pose a challenge as long as these subdivisions do not exhibit contrasting patterns of inclusion and exclusion. However, the categorization of Turkic speakers, which includes languages such as Azeri and Turkmen, requires adjustment. Azeris have historically been junior partners in power in Iran, whereas Turkmen, who are Sunni Turkic speakers, are part of the excluded minority category. To address this issue, we utilized information on the residence patterns of Turkmen in Iran, primarily located in three eastern provinces, in conjunction with our data on the Sunni religion. This allowed us to differentiate Turkmen from other Turkic speakers, ensuring a more accurate representation of their distinct experiences and grievances.

Our approach to constructing variables for ethnolinguistic groups is innovative, yet subject to limitations due to the dated nature of the data and necessary assumptions regarding village population sizes. Despite these challenges, it provides a foundational basis for examining the ethnolinguistic composition of districts across Iran, offering valuable insights into the country's demographic landscape, characterized by a rich mosaic of languages and ethnicities.

Figure 3. Ethnolinguistic Groups in Iran



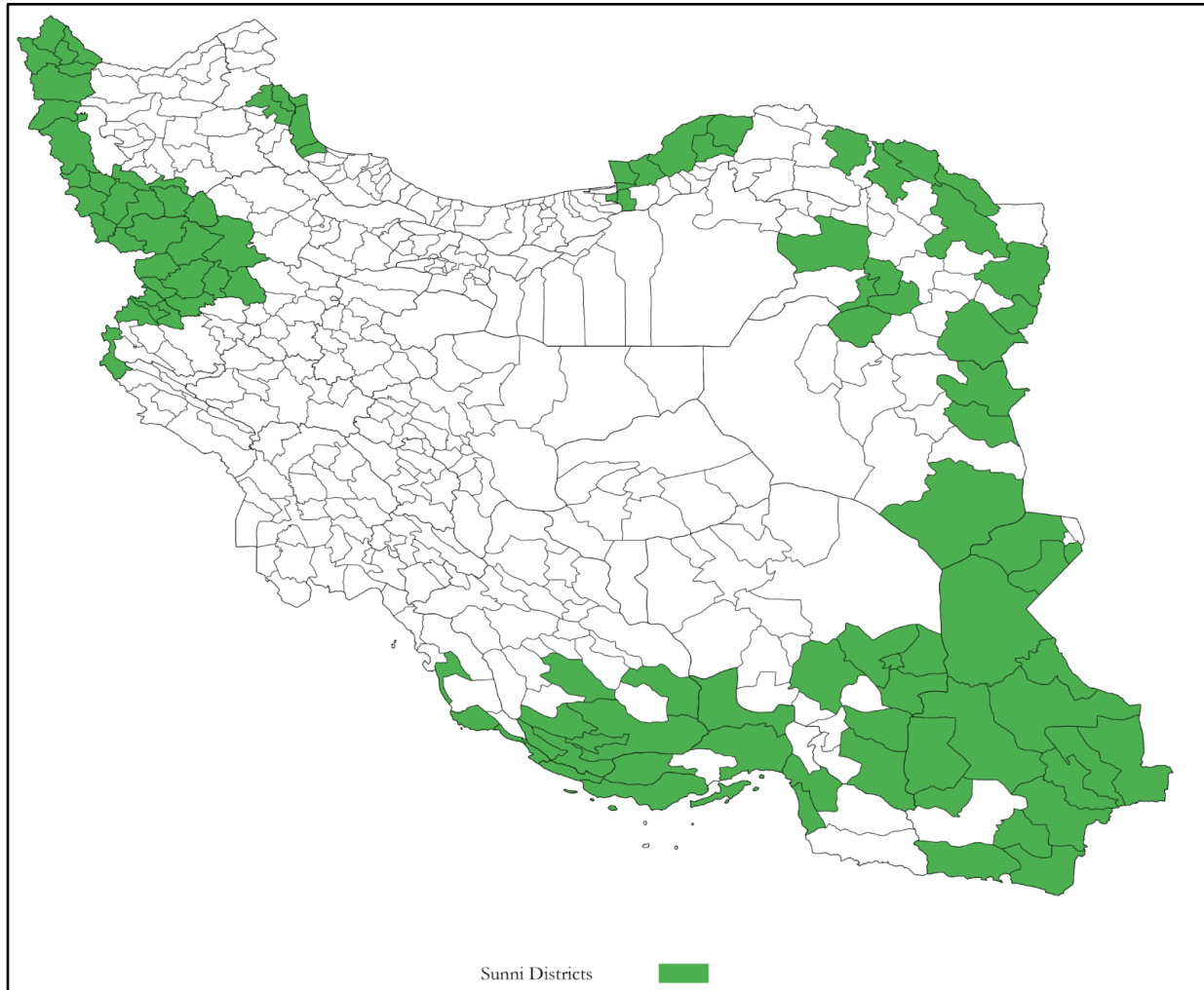
Note: Figure 3 presents the spatial distribution of ethnolinguistic groups across districts in Iran. Darker colors represent higher volumes.

6.2.3. Religion: The Iranian government does not publicly release detailed information on religious demographics and locations. To address this gap, we rely on an existing dataset that identifies Sunni Kurdish districts (Tezcür and Asadzade 2019), which we have augmented through additional research to extend this classification to all districts across the country. From these data sources, we construct a binary variable for each district, assigning a value of 1 to districts with a significant Sunni population and a value of 0 to predominantly Shi'i districts.

Iran hosts a diverse array of religious minorities, each experiencing distinct protest participation dynamics. Recognized religious groups like Jews and Christians, with designated parliamentary seats, typically refrain from engaging in protest politics, likely due to their formal representation and the potential risks involved. On the other hand, severely persecuted groups like the Bahais are often deterred from protesting due to harsh repression threats. The Sunni minority

has been actively involved in both electoral processes and various protest mobilizations, including armed and unarmed actions, over the past few decades. This engagement reflects the unique socio-political position of the Sunnis in Iran, characterized by a more contentious relationship with the state compared to other religious groups (see Figure 4 for a map of Sunni districts).

Figure 4. Sunni Districts in Iran



Note: Figure 4 shows the spatial distribution of Sunni districts in Iran, with the green color representing the Sunni population.

6.2.4. Elections: To analyze the relationship between electoral participation and protests, we incorporate a variable for electoral turnout. This is calculated by dividing the number of votes cast

by the number of eligible voters over 18, based on the 2016 census data, the most recent available. For the Dey and Aban protests, we reference the 2017 presidential election, while for the 2022 protests, we examine the 2021 election. This variable assesses district residents' confidence in utilizing regime institutions, particularly elections, to express their grievances.³

6.2.5. Education: The size of the middle class is often determined through indicators of education or income. We opt for educational attainment as a proxy for the middle class in Iran, focusing on the percentage of individuals with higher education degrees within a district, as per the 2016 census. This choice is supported by discussions in the literature highlighting the critical role of education in shaping the Iranian middle class and its lifestyle preferences (Azizimehr 2023; Daghighaleh 2018).

6.2.6 Income: Income: To date, there has been no available data source for income at the district level. In this study, we introduce the first measure for the share of lower-income households within a given district, defined as the percentage of households in the bottom two deciles of income distribution. This data, which we have digitized specifically for this project, is sourced from the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour, and Social Welfare (2019). Additionally, the dataset includes information on the percentage of households in the top two and bottom three deciles, which we utilized for robustness checks. We incorporate this measure into our analysis based on claims that lower socioeconomic classes were disproportionately represented among participants in the first and second episodes of the revolutionary movements under study.

³ Electoral participation rates exceeding 100% in certain small districts during the 2017 election can be attributed to inter-district voter mobility patterns, particularly in areas adjacent to larger population centers. This statistical anomaly emerges from the spatial dynamics of voter behavior, wherein residents of larger districts exercise their voting rights in neighboring smaller districts. Such cross-boundary electoral participation leads to artificially inflated turnout rates in these smaller administrative units, as the number of actual voters surpasses the registered voting population. This pattern is consistent with research on spatial voting behavior and administrative boundary effects in electoral participation, where geographic proximity and accessibility of polling stations can influence voting location choices regardless of official district designations.

6.2.7. Prior Protests: In analyzing the three revolutionary episodes in Iran, it is crucial to consider that these events did not occur in isolation. Literature on contentious mobilization and state repression suggests that prior episodes significantly influence subsequent occurrences. This historical context likely affects the spatial distribution of protests, potentially overshadowing the distinct impacts of individual triggers. To account for this dynamic, we incorporate variables capturing the number of protest days within each district during previous episodes. The Dey protests represent the initial episode of anti-regime contention under study. Given that the primary national-level contentious episode was the 2009 protests, largely concentrated in Tehran and a few other metropolitan districts for several days, we excluded this variable for the first episode analysis.

For the second episode, our model incorporates the number of protests in each district from the first episode. In the third episode, we tracked the cumulative protest days from the first two episodes. Moreover, we considered the potential impact of government repression on subsequent episodes. We compiled data on the number of individuals killed in each district during each episode from human rights organizations and news reports. In the first episode, 22 individuals were reported killed in various districts, while over 300 fatalities were documented in numerous districts during the second episode, according to Amnesty International. Due to the high correlation between our measures of prior protests and repression, we primarily included the protest variable in our main models and reserved repression measures for robustness checks. This approach enabled us to assess more accurately the influence of past mobilizations and state responses on the revolutionary activity dynamics over time.

6.2.8. Other Controls

The analysis incorporates basic control variables, including district population size, and urban population proportion. Table 4 provides a statistical summary of these variables.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Median	SD	P5	P95
Dey Protests 2017-8	0.503	0.000	1.173	0.000	3.000
Aban Protests 2019	0.569	0.000	1.230	0.000	3.000
Amini Protests 2022	2.247	0.000	6.369	0.000	13.000
Annual Flare Volume 2017	35.167	0.000	182.655	0.000	164.534
Annual Flare Volume 2018	33.839	0.000	178.584	0.000	176.554
Annual Flare Volume 2021	34.460	0.000	195.135	0.000	102.771
Election Turnout 2017 (%)	84.744	82.000	46.201	58.773	107.519
Election Turnout 2021 (%)	57.010	56.418	23.755	29.331	86.397
University Graduates (%)	9.090	8.851	3.987	3.119	15.757
Households from Two Lowest Income Deciles (%)	18.467	16.434	9.641	6.899	38.151
Sunni District	0.240	0.000	0.428	0.000	1.000
Kurdish (%)	10.741	0.000	24.306	0.000	76.650
Arabic (%)	2.536	0.000	9.590	0.000	17.721
Baluchi (%)	3.446	0.000	13.179	0.000	22.868
Lori (%)	4.352	0.000	14.256	0.000	33.213
Caspian (%)	6.315	0.000	19.503	0.000	58.586
Persian (%)	34.490	24.638	32.229	0.000	95.869
Turkic (%)	15.147	1.134	26.822	0.000	92.503
Turkmen (%)	15.147	1.134	26.822	0.000	92.503
Population	186,000	86,601	505,000	23,929	536,000
Urban Population (%)	55.868	56.917	22.027	16.560	90.248

Notes: SD represents standard deviation; P5 and P95 represent the 5th and 95th percentiles, respectively. Annual flare volumes are measured in million cubic meters. Protest counts represent cumulative events in each period. The Sunni District variable is binary (0/1). Variables are measured at the district level for all 429 districts in Iran.

7. Statistical Method

To analyze the variation in protest activity levels during each of the three revolutionary episodes at the district level, we focus on the differences in protest frequency across districts. Given that our primary variables of interest are time-invariant, we aggregate the total number of protests occurring in each district by the end of each respective episode. To create a continuous outcome variable, we take the log of the total protests in each district plus one. This approach enables us to capture the cumulative intensity of protest activity within distinct geographical areas, providing a comprehensive view of how protest dynamics unfolded across Iran's diverse landscape.

Since we are interested in the spatial spread of protest, we employ spatial regression to model the effect of confounders on the level of protest in a given district. Spatial models

incorporate a lag, representing a weighted sum of protest events in neighboring districts. The spatial-autoregressive parameter λ measures the average extent of clustering effects in the model. By using spatial regression models, we account for the fact that protests in one district may be influenced by events in nearby districts (Anselin 1995; Thomson 2018; Ward and Gleditsch 2018).

To complement our spatial regression analysis, we conduct event-history analysis for each episode. In these models, the unit of analysis is district-day, with a binary outcome variable indicating whether a protest occurred in a district on a given day. Once a district experiences its first day of protest, it is subsequently dropped from the sample. While our main models examine the frequency of protests within districts, these event-history models assess the effect of confounders on the timing of protests, specifically the time it takes a district to experience its first protest. The results of these models are reported as robustness checks.

8. Spatial Regression analysis

Table 5. Results of Spatial Regression Models.

	<i>Dependent Variable</i>		
	(1) Dey Protests 2017-8	(2) Aban Protests 2019	(3) Amini Protests 2022
Dey Protests 2017-8		0.214*** (0.0529)	
Dey & Aban Protests			0.321*** (0.0577)
Annual Flare Volume 2017	0.0148 (0.0179)		
Annual Flare Volume 2018		0.0395* (0.0195)	
Annual Flare Volume 2021			-0.0674* (0.0274)
Election Turnout 2017 %	0.0000225 (0.000371)	-0.000354 (0.000403)	
Election Turnout 2021 %			-0.00111 (0.00126)
University Graduates%	0.0268*** (0.00675)	0.0130+ (0.00740)	0.0470*** (0.0103)
Households from the Two Lowest Income Deciles	0.00438 (0.00357)	-0.00526 (0.00385)	-0.00535 (0.00529)
Sunni District	-0.0832 (0.0520)	-0.0545 (0.0547)	0.265*** (0.0749)
Kurdish %	0.000539 (0.00114)	-0.000368 (0.00119)	0.00562*** (0.00156)
Arabic %	-0.00113 (0.00211)	0.00448* (0.00225)	-0.00540+ (0.00308)
Baluchi %	0.0000129 (0.00211)	-0.00169 (0.00221)	0.00285 (0.00291)
Lori %	0.00114 (0.00152)	-0.0000256 (0.00162)	-0.00295 (0.00220)
Caspian %	-0.00191 (0.00131)	-0.00377** (0.00140)	-0.00169 (0.00188)
Persian %	0.000364 (0.000899)	-0.00245* (0.000968)	-0.00148 (0.00132)
Turkic %	-0.000581 (0.00104)	-0.00278* (0.00111)	-0.00283+ (0.00147)
Turkmen %	-0.00245 (0.00329)	-0.00389 (0.00355)	-0.0100* (0.00484)
Population (ln)	0.323*** (0.0215)	0.223*** (0.0289)	0.433*** (0.0424)
Urban Population %	0.000993 (0.00130)	0.000751 (0.00139)	-0.00129 (0.00195)
Constant	-3.845*** (0.252)	-2.212*** (0.335)	-4.727*** (0.490)
<i>lambda</i> Constant	0.760*** (0.159)	0.668*** (0.195)	0.369 (0.296)
<i>sigma</i> Constant	0.336*** (0.0115)	0.364*** (0.0125)	0.505*** (0.0173)
Observations	429	429	429
<i>AIC</i>	322.7	392.1	671.1
<i>BIC</i>	395.8	469.2	748.3
<i>Note:</i> Standard errors in parentheses + $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$			

8.1. Model 1: Dey Protests of 2017-18

Table 5 presents the results of our spatial regression analysis, with each model corresponding to one of the three revolutionary episodes. Model 1 focuses on the Dey protests of 2017-18. The results indicate no significant correlation between oil extraction, ethnoreligious composition, and protest intensity. This outcome is consistent with the observation that the influence of the initial trigger—organized protests by hardliners against President Rouhani—was confined to the first day, affecting only five districts where the hardliner candidate had garnered more support in the 2017 presidential election. However, a notable shift occurred when diaspora opposition called for broader protests from the second day onwards, thereby diluting the initial trigger's impact.

In this model, the size of the college-educated population is a positive and significant predictor of protest levels, reinforcing the idea that calls for regime change resonated with segments of the middle class. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that a substantial portion of Iran's educated class supports radical political change, contributing to higher levels of anti-regime protest in more educated districts (Asadzade 2024; Daghighaleh 2018).

8.2. Model 2: Aban Protests of 2019

The Aban protests of 2019, triggered by fuel subsidy cuts and a sharp increase in fuel prices, exhibited a distinct pattern in their geographic spread. Flare volumes, used as a proxy for oil facilities, emerged as a positive and significant predictor of protest levels. This indicates that districts with oil infrastructure experienced higher levels of protest, a pattern distinct from the first episode, where this measure was insignificant, and the third episode, where it was negative and significant. Figure 5 provides a visual comparison of these variables across the three models.

A higher proportion of Arab speakers within a district correlated positively with protest levels, underscoring the particular grievances of Arab communities in oil-rich regions. These communities often feel marginalized and excluded from the benefits of local oil wealth. In contrast, the coefficients for other ethnolinguistic groups, including Caspian, Persian, and Turkic speakers—typically more remote from oil extraction—exhibited lower protest rates, as indicated by negative and statistically significant coefficients. Remarkably, the positive correlation between Arab speakers and protest levels is unique to this episode, as the coefficient for Arabs was negative and insignificant in both the first and third episodes.

The measure for the college-educated population remains positive in this model but has the smallest effect size and the lowest level of statistical significance compared to the other two models. This aligns with the idea that the trigger of this episode—fuel price hikes—had the least resonance with the educated class.

The measure for prior protests was also significant and positive, indicating that districts with a history of mobilization were more likely to engage in the Aban protests.

These findings demonstrate how an oil and gas-related trigger influenced the geographic distribution of protest activity. Districts with more oil flares experienced increased protest rates, while areas with a higher proportion of Arabs, strongly connected to oil extraction, displayed higher protest rates. In contrast, regions with ethnic groups disconnected from oil extraction participated less.

8.3. Model 3: 2022 Amini Protests

The 2022 protests, ignited by the death of a Sunni Kurdish woman at the hands of Iran's morality police, highlight the significant influence of the trigger on the geographic spread of protests.

Notably, Sunni and Kurdish districts exhibited a positive and statistically significant correlation with protest levels, marking a stark contrast to the patterns observed in the earlier episodes. When comparing across models, the coefficient for Kurds is statistically insignificant in the first two episodes. In the first model, it is positive but approximately 10 times smaller than in model 3, and it turns negative in the second model. Similarly, the coefficient for Sunnis is negative and statistically insignificant in models 1 and 2 but becomes significant and substantially larger in model 3.

Interestingly, the correlation for flare volumes shifts from positive to negative, indicating that oil-related grievances were not a driving factor in this episode. Similarly, the correlation for Arab speakers also changes direction, highlighting that the grievances related to oil extraction, prevalent among the Arab population, were not activated by this episode's trigger.

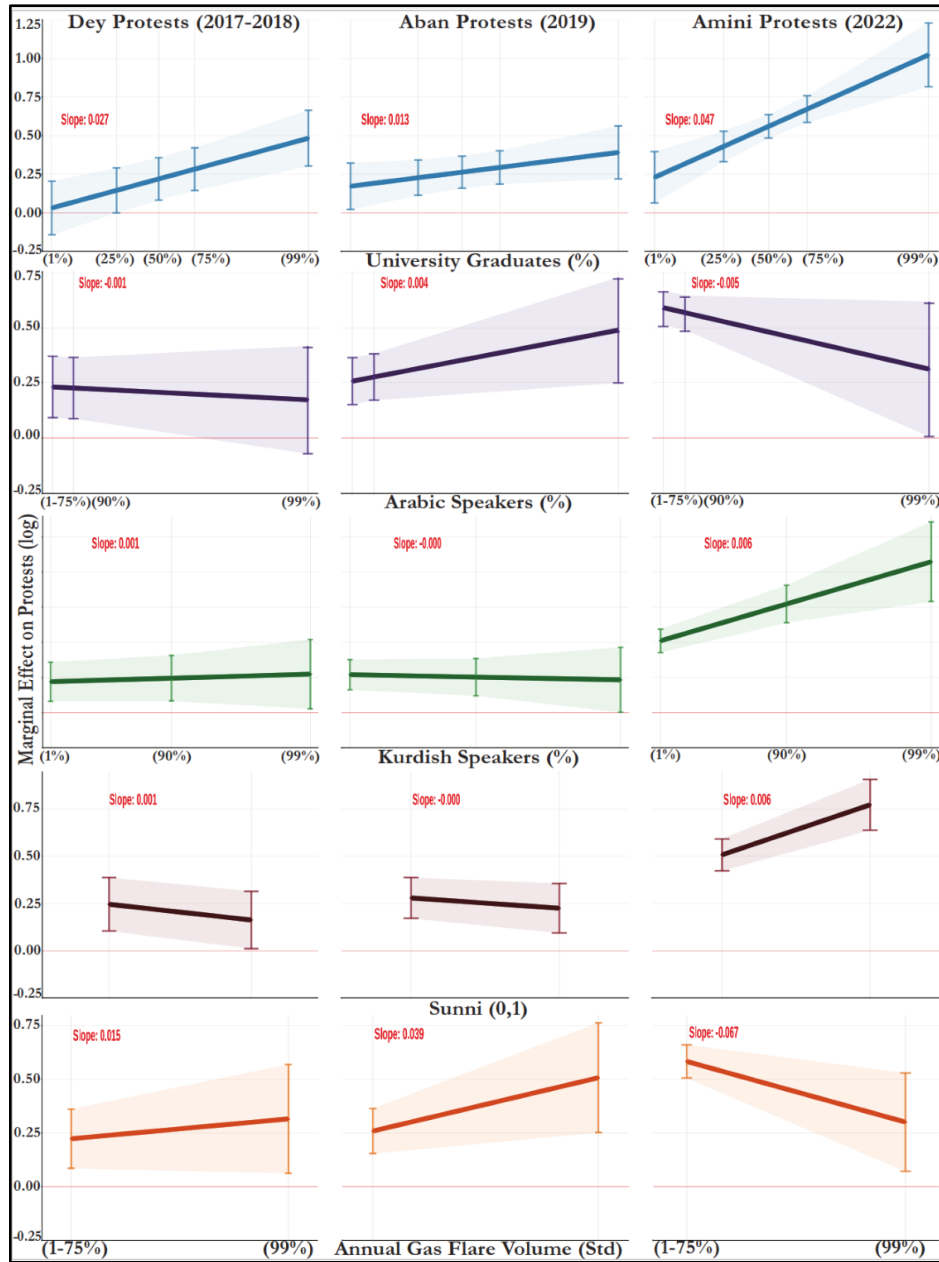
The measure for the college-educated population is also positive and statistically significant in this episode, with the largest effect size among the three episodes. This aligns with the long-standing demand for women's freedom and autonomy among Iran's educated class. Accordingly, the trigger—state violence against a woman over her hijab—resonated most strongly with the middle class in this episode.

Additionally, the measure for prior protests remains significant and positive in this episode. The inclusion of this variable ensures that the observed changes in the direction and significance of flare volume and Arab speakers are not attributed to mobilization or repression effects from the previous episodes.

Overall, the findings underscore how the specific trigger in 2022 uniquely shaped the geographic distribution of protests. Sunni and Kurdish grievances were prominently activated, whereas those related to oil extraction and Arabs remained dormant.

Figure 5 visually illustrates the effect sizes of key variables across the three episodes, including the proportion of the college-educated population, Arabic speakers, Kurdish speakers, Sunni districts, and the volume of annual flares. This comparison highlights how the influence of these variables shifts depending on the specific trigger of each episode.

Figure 5. Marginal Effects of Key Variables on Protest



Notes: Figure 5 presents the marginal effects of the percentage of university graduates, ethnicity (proportions of Arabic and Kurdish speakers), environmental factors (annual gas flare volume), and religious demographics (a binary indicator for the presence of a Sunni population) on protest participation across three episodes.

The distribution of these variables is examined using percentile brackets, ranging from the 1st to the 99th percentile. The chosen percentile points were selected based on the underlying data distributions, ensuring that the analysis captures meaningful variation while preserving statistical power to thoroughly examine the relationships between the independent variables and protest participation.

9. Robustness Checks

To ensure the robustness of our findings, we tested a variety of model specifications by including numerous contextual variables such as access to insurance (Appendix Table A1) or government cash transfer programs (Appendix Table A2), unemployment rates (Appendix Table A3), the number of hospital beds per 1,000 people or health centers (Appendix Table A4 & A5), and the number of NGOs (Appendix Table A6). Specifically, we included the percentages of reformist votes from 2017 presidential elections (Appendix Table A7). Moreover, we substituted the measures for low-income deciles with percentages of top (Appendix Table A8) and middle-income deciles (Appendix Table A9). Additionally, we ran alternative models where we switched the prior protest measure with prior repression (Appendix Table A10) and models that simultaneously included both measures (Appendix Table A11). Our main findings remained consistent across these controls, allowing us to address some of the rival explanations. For instance, Sunni districts generally more impoverished than Shi'a districts. However, even when we include measures of the percentage of low-income households or access to social services, the measure for Sunni districts remains significant, contrasting with the new controls. These results indicate that the activation of the Sunni identity, rather than levels of poverty or impoverishment, drives the association between our Sunni measure and the protest rate. Similarly, this pattern holds for our variables related to the size of the ethnolinguistic groups. For instance, Kurdish districts exhibit higher rates of unemployment. Nevertheless, even when controlling for unemployment, our Kurdish variable remains a positive and significant correlate of protest rates in the third episode.

As an alternative modeling strategy, we employed time-series event-history analysis, as described in the method section (Appendix Table A12). In the event history models, we introduced a variable measuring proximity to other protest sites on preceding days. This model assesses the impact of confounders on the speed at which a district experiences protests.

Although some contextual variables fluctuated in significance across different models—for example, electoral turnout became significant in some models—the core results remained stable across all model variations. This consistency reinforces the reliability of our primary conclusions regarding the impact of triggers on contextual factors across episodes. Please see the appendix for the output of our robustness tests.

11. Conclusion

Scholars of revolution have long debated the roles of structure and contingency in shaping revolutions. While some theories align exclusively with structural explanations or contingency, others seek to synthesize these approaches (Beck et al. 2022; Beissinger 2024; Ermakoff 2015; Goldstone, Grinin, and Korotayev 2022). In this article, we attempt to explain why different revolutionary episodes unfold in distinctive patterns. Our framework suggests that distinct triggers leave their imprint on the geographic expansion of revolutionary episodes. Different triggers activate different sources of discontent and solidarity, resulting in distinct geographic expansion patterns. Moreover, triggers themselves reflect broader societal fault lines. Every society has inherent fault lines, and an interplay between broader structural changes and the actions and reactions of collective actors such as government, opposition groups, and other socio-political entities, determines which triggers are activated at any given time.

The recent revolutionary episodes in Iran offer a unique opportunity to compare revolutionary dynamics. As a middle-income hybrid regime grappling with issues of religious and ethnic discrimination, Iran represents a scenario where the likelihood of revolutionary outbreaks is heightened, according to recent studies (Beissinger 2022; Natalini, Bravo, and Newman 2020; Wimmer, Cederman, and Min 2009). This analysis leverages the variation across three consecutive revolutionary episodes in Iran, each characterized by distinct triggers, to investigate the relationship

between these triggers and the geographic expansion of revolutionary activities. By adopting this approach, we gain a nuanced understanding of how specific initiating events influence the spread and intensity of revolutionary episodes within the country.

Our analysis of three consecutive revolutionary episodes in Iran demonstrates how the distinct character of each trigger influenced the geographic expansion patterns of those episodes. The first episode, sparked by hardliner-organized protests against the moderate administration of Hassan Rouhani, initially saw protesting districts concentrated in hardliner electoral strongholds. However, the diffusion dynamics shifted on the second day as opposition activists issued calls for wider protests. The second episode was catalyzed by a sudden increase in fuel prices, which activated grievances related to oil extraction and increased protest rates in districts with oil facilities. This episode also witnessed higher levels of participation by Arab districts, an excluded ethnic minority with the highest level of concentration around oil fields. In contrast, the third episode was triggered by the death of a Sunni Kurdish woman at the hands of Iran's morality police because the police considered her covering improper, resulting in heightened protest activity in Kurdish and Sunni districts. Additionally, middle-class districts consistently showed higher participation rates across all three episodes, with the effect being most pronounced in the third episode, reflecting the middle class's longstanding opposition to government restrictions on women. Each episode shows demonstrates specific triggers can significantly shape the response and spread of revolutionary activities across different regions.

These results collectively illustrate how specific triggers can activate distinct potential fault lines for contention. For instance, Kurdish and Sunni districts, which faced varying forms of discrimination in Iran, only experienced high rates of protest when the triggers directly related to their identities and grievances. Similarly, grievances associated with oil extraction were present throughout all three episodes. However, districts with oil facilities predominantly protested when the

trigger specifically pertained to fuel prices. Additionally, while the proportion of college-educated individuals positively predicted protest participation in all three episodes, its impact was most pronounced in the third episode. In this case, a repressive event targeting a woman for her hijab resonated deeply with longstanding demands of Iran's educated class for female freedom and autonomy.

To address rival explanations, we rely on comparative historical analysis. The recurrent nature of the episodes within a relatively short time frame, coupled with case-specific details, allows us to rule out alternative explanations. First, the temporal proximity between episodes rules out the possibility of major structural transformations. Our data confirms continuity in patterns of oil and gas extraction, and reports from human rights organizations document persistent ethnic exclusion. However, two rival explanations remain: the influence of prior episodes on subsequent ones, and the shift in political context due to less competitive elections, despite stable ethnic and class structures.

These explanations might account for the higher rates of mobilization among the middle class, Kurds, and Sunnis in the third episode. Yet, they are insufficient without considering the role of triggers. For instance, isolated instances of women removing their hijabs during the first episode did not lead to mass defiance in the second episode, as its trigger centered on fuel prices rather than women's issues. However, these earlier acts of defiance gained momentum in the third episode when the trigger directly addressed women's grievances.

Similarly, one could argue that the repression following the second episode, combined with the contraction of electoral opportunities, mobilized the educated population, Kurds, and Sunnis. However, this logic falls short. If valid, it should have also led to higher mobilization among other marginalized groups like Baluchis and Turkmens. Additionally, following the 2021 election, Arabs in the southwest mobilized intensely against poor water quality and air pollution, but the middle class

and other excluded ethnicities did not join, as the trigger did not resonate with their grievances. In sum, while these rival explanations provide valuable insights into the broader context of contention, they fail to fully account for the patterns observed across episodes without considering the distinct role of triggers.

A common feature shared by these three episodes is that they all failed to escalate into full revolutionary situations, where millions demanded regime change. The government successfully contained and repressed these movements before they reached a critical mass. The extent to which the specific triggers shaped their geographic spread likely contributed to their failure. For a revolutionary episode to succeed and grow in size, it generally requires scale shifts, where new actors enter and engage in coordination, diminishing the initial trigger's significance over time.

In each of the three episodes of revolutionary mobilization in Iran, we emphasized specific dynamics related to natural resource extraction, ethnicity, and religion. However, these factors were not the only significant dynamics at play in each episode. The convergence of multiple issues and geographic factors influenced mobilization patterns. A consistent trend emerged in all episodes: districts with more educated populations consistently exhibited higher rates of protest participation. This indicates the formation of a coalition between the middle class and groups advocating for claims of oil-related or ethnoreligious exclusion. This coalition closely resembles the winning electoral coalitions of reformists over the past quarter century. Historically, districts with larger middle-class populations and excluded ethnic and religious groups have tended to support moderate and reformist candidates.

Despite the formation of this coalition, not all excluded religious and ethnic groups participated simultaneously in the three episodes analyzed. When Arabs were prominent, Kurds and Sunnis were less involved, and conversely, when Kurds and Sunnis led the protests, other excluded

ethnicities participated to a lesser extent. Similarly, the level of participation by the educated class varied across the three episodes. This fragmentation reflects the fact that these three episodes ultimately failed to achieve their goals because they were unable to unite all members of the pro-change coalition.

To what extent does our argument extend beyond the context of Iran? Recent subnational analyses of revolutionary episodes in the Middle East provide compelling examples of how triggers shape fault lines of contention in other settings. Previously, we mentioned an instance from the Tunisian revolution, where a repressive event against a street vendor activated economic grievances, leading to the initial spread of revolutionary protests across less developed regions of the country (Barrie 2023). Here, we consider another example from Syria: the arrest and torture of children who had written anti-regime graffiti in the city of Daraa. This repressive act by government security agents generated widespread moral outrage among residents, sparking revolutionary protests that quickly spread to other regions.

In Syria, both Sunni and Kurdish communities have faced exclusion and have histories of anti-regime mobilization and repression. While the trigger in Daraa could be interpreted as a broader instance of regime brutality against all Syrian communities, subnational analyses of the 2011 protests reveal a different pattern. Sunni districts exhibited significantly higher rates of protest participation than other districts, while Kurdish districts did not follow this trend (Mazur 2018, 2021). This discrepancy likely stemmed from the fact that the initial trigger occurred in a Sunni-majority town, resonating more strongly with Sunni communities. However, this pattern evolved during the civil war phase of the insurgency, as Kurdish insurgent groups engaged in combat against the Syrian government, at times aligning with and at other times opposing Sunni rebels. These cases underscore the broader applicability of our argument: triggers resonate differently with various fault

lines, activating distinct patterns of mobilization based on the specific context and dynamics of each episode.

Ethnic and religious exclusion, along with natural resource extraction, are central to Iranian politics and society, reflecting similar dynamics in many countries across the Global South. Triggers tied to these sources of discontent can activate fault lines related to social class, electoral participation, and historical patterns of repression in varied contexts. While our study focuses on comparisons across three episodes within Iran, future research could extend this framework to explore how similar or different triggers shape revolutionary episodes in other countries. Such cross-national analysis would deepen our understanding of how triggers influence revolutionary dynamics worldwide, shedding light on the mechanisms driving mass mobilizations and their diverse outcomes.

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