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Picturing Protest: Visual Framing in Authoritarian Media on Twitter

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how media in authoritarian regimes visually frame protests on Twitter/X, extending the protest paradigm theory – traditionally applied to democratic contexts – to non-democratic settings where media operate under varying degrees of state control. Leveraging over 331 million tweets from 9,331 news outlet accounts across 144 countries, we identify 124,301 protest images from 38 authoritarian countries. Through computer vision analysis, we classify these images into four protest paradigms: *riot*, *confrontation*, *spectacle*, and *debate*. We find that *spectacle* and *debate* are the most common frames in authoritarian media. We observe a recurrent cross-national pattern: domestic protests are more often depicted through the *debate* frame, while imagery of *riot*, *confrontation*, and *spectacle* appears disproportionately in coverage of foreign protests. Variations in press freedom further shape these portrayals – greater freedom correlates with more depictions of riots and confrontations. This study redefines the protest paradigm for non-democratic contexts, provides large-scale empirical evidence of authoritarian media strategies, and demonstrates how even limited press freedom can be co-opted to serve state interests.

KEYWORDS

Protest; paradigm; media; authoritarian; regime

Introduction

In democratic societies, media coverage shapes public support for protests; in authoritarian states, it can determine their very existence. When citizens face severe consequences for dissent, from imprisonment to violence, the information they receive is not abstract – it directly informs their calculus of risk, viability, and solidarity. Visual media, in particular, cuts through the “fog” of state propaganda to offer powerful, visceral cues: Do the protesters look numerous and powerful, or isolated and weak? Is the state responding with tolerance or brutality? For the regime, controlling these visual narratives is a cornerstone of survival. This control is not merely about

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ensorship; it is a sophisticated strategy of information management. It allows the state to selectively permit coverage to act as a “safety valve” that identifies social grievances and enhances authoritarian resilience (Huang, Boranbay-Akan, and Huang 2019). Furthermore, the state’s decision to allow or repress protest framing serves as a form of “authoritarian signaling,” sending credible messages of resolve to international adversaries during crises (Weiss 2013). Analyzing the visual framing of protest in these high-stakes environments is therefore essential for understanding the mechanisms of modern political control, citizen mobilization, and geopolitical statecraft.

This article conceptualizes this dynamic as a “struggle for visibility” over the meaning of protest, a concept that has deep roots in media studies (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993). In the digital age, this struggle is waged primarily through images. Visuals are uniquely potent; they can establish quick, emotionally resonant symbols of injustice more effectively than text (Lim, 2013) and are central to how protest is expressed and understood (Neumayer and Rossi 2018). This visual battleground, however, is not a level playing field. Both journalistic norms and social media logics tend to privilege a “spectacle of violence,” a focus on dramatic conflict that often pushes the actual grievances of activists into the background (Juris 2005; Poell and Van Dijk 2015). This inherent media bias toward conflict creates a strategic opportunity for political actors seeking to shape public perception.

The “protest paradigm” (Chan and Lee 1984) provides a robust framework for this analysis. Developed through studies of democratic contexts, it identifies four key media frames – *riot*, *confrontation*, *spectacle*, and *debate* – that often serve to marginalize dissent (McLeod and Hertog 1999). However, its application has been limited, leaving two critical gaps in the literature. First, the framework has been overwhelmingly applied to singular, democratic nations, leaving its function in authoritarian regimes under-theorized (e.g., Balan and Dumitrica 2022; Kyriakidou and Olivas Osuna 2017). Second, the majority of studies still exclusively focus on text, overlooking the role of images in today’s digital media landscape (Gil-Lopez 2021), despite the visual dimension being arguably the paradigm’s most powerful component. This study confronts both of these gaps by systematically investigating how the four visual protest paradigms are strategically deployed by news media across 38 authoritarian states.

By leveraging over 331 million tweets posted between 4 August 2016 and 1 June 2023, from 9331 Twitter news outlet accounts spanning 144 countries – sourced from the “News Outlet Tweet IDs” dataset provided by George Washington University (Littman et al. 2017) – we identified and conducted a large-scale computational analysis of 124,301 protest images from 38 authoritarian countries. Our findings reveal three key contributions to the literature. First, we find that *debate* and *spectacle* are the most frequent frames, suggesting that authoritarian media strategy often relies on co-optation and narrative management, not just overt vilification. Second, we observe a pattern consistent with “authoritarian mirroring”: domestic protests are more often framed as controlled *debate*, while the frames of *riot*, *confrontation*, and *spectacle* are used less frequently. This tactic minimizes internal threats while allowing foreign dissent to be portrayed as chaotic. Third, we find that greater press freedom paradoxically correlates with more *riot* and *confrontation* framing, revealing how even limited media autonomy is co-opted into state narrative strategies. By illuminating these strategic calculations, this study provides vital insights into how authoritarian

regimes use visual media not only to control dissent at home but also to project power on the global stage.

Literature Review

Protest Paradigm

A rich body of literature has explored how news media marginalize and delegitimize protests by portraying the actions and participants as deviant and threatening (Boykoff 2006; Dardis 2006; McLeod and Hertog 1999). Social movement scholars argue that media coverage of protests often emphasizes their negative consequences, framing them as disruptions to public order, with journalists frequently depicting protesters as irrational and criminal (Snow, Vliegenthart, and Corrigan-Brown 2007). The media representation of protests is important because it provides schemata of interpretation through which audiences could make sense of protests (Harlow et al. 2017). Such representations can also facilitate mobilization and participation (Benford and Snow 2000).

Scholars introduced the notion of “protest paradigm” to examine the negative coverage and delegitimization of protests (Chan and Lee 1984). This paradigm suggests that news coverage of protests is often characterized by normative evaluations that highlight the deviance of the protesting groups and support for established institutions (Gil-Lopez 2021). Furthermore, McLeod and Hertog (1999) identify four frames that mainstream news media often use to marginalize and trivialize protests – *riot*, *confrontation*, *spectacle*, and *debate*. Specifically, *riot* indicates the coverage of violence and destruction of protesters, whereas *confrontation* refers to the clashes and conflicts between police and protesters in the news (McLeod and Hertog 1999). *Spectacle* suggests that news media focus on the sensationalism and odd actions of protesters in their coverage, and the *debate* frame highlights the grievances and goals of protesters in their reporting (McLeod and Hertog 1999). Moreover, Dardis (2016) proposes 14 “marginalization devices” used in protest reporting, such as confrontation with police, sources, and historical comparisons (Dardis 2006). Taken together, these frames and devices help us understand the “routinized pattern or implicit template for the coverage of social protest” (McLeod and Hertog 1999, p.310).

Scholars have employed the dimensions of protest paradigm to analyze news coverage of protests in various contexts. Many studies have confirmed the use of protest paradigm within the media environment of Western democracies, such as Australia (McFarlane and Hay 2003), Spain and Greece (Kyriakidou and Olivas Osuna 2017), the UK (Gruber 2023), and the USA (Balan and Dumitrica 2022). Recent literature has expanded the protest paradigm to investigate news coverage in some non-Western contexts, including China, Chile, and India (García-Perdomo et al. 2023; Shahin et al. 2016). This body of scholarship claims that news media utilize the protest paradigm to diminish the perceived legitimacy of protests, exaggerate the threat of protesters, and cite official sources to affirm established systems (Gil-Lopez 2021; Gruber 2023).

Indeed, research has found that media could emphasize *confrontation* and *riot* to frame protesters as violent and deviant participants, and they report *spectacle* and *debate* to quote official sources and support established systems (Boyle, McLeod, and

Armstrong 2012; Harlow et al. 2017; Kyriakidou and Olivas Osuna 2017; McLeod 2007). For instance, McFarlane and Hay (2003) demonstrate that Australia's national daily newspaper devalued and demonized anti-WTO protesters by highlighting WTO supporters and official sources in the news. Moreover, Harlow and Johnson (2011) discover that *The New York Times* downplayed protesters by highlighting the *spectacle* and citing official sources.

Early protest paradigm research focused on legacy media within single countries, but recent work has taken a comparative approach. Shahin et al. (2016) examined Brazil, China, and India, finding Indian media least likely to marginalize protesters, with Brazilian and Chinese outlets showing moderate adherence, shaped by historical and political factors. Harlow et al. (2020) developed a typology across mainstream, alternative, and online media, revealing variation in framing by protest location, type, and media region. Moreover, the rise of social media has complicated protest paradigm research. Platforms like Twitter offer affordances for users to engage in connective actions, and movements like #BlackLivesMatter or #MeToo circumvent traditional media gatekeepers to diffuse protest information. Meanwhile, the rapid growth of alternative and digital-native media further offers different information and news for social media users. Indeed, while legacy media often delegitimize protests through *riot* and *spectacle* frames, alternative and digital-native outlets tend to employ debate frames to amplify activists' voices and legitimize social movements (Harlow et al. 2020). Recent research has found that legitimizing frames on social media increased audience identification with protesters and criticism of police (Brown and Mourão 2021).

Factors Affecting Adherence to Protest Paradigm

Scholars note that the protest paradigm is applied in diverse ways depending on contextual factors (Harlow et al. 2017). Prior research highlights several conditions shaping coverage. First, the nature of a protest matters: political protests tend to be portrayed more critically than those centered on social or public issues (Boyle, McLeod, and Armstrong 2012). Second, goals and tactics influence framing, as demonstrations using radical tactics are often depicted through violence and disruption, while those advancing extreme or deviant goals receive little supportive coverage (Boyle, McLeod, and Armstrong 2012; Lee 2014). Third, location and media system also matter: protests in non-Western countries are often framed more favorably and less violently by Western outlets compared to protests within Western democracies (Boyle, McLeod, and Armstrong 2012; Harlow and Johnson 2011). Beyond these event-level factors, media environments shape adherence to the paradigm. Some scholars argue that news outlets consistently marginalize protesters, while others suggest variation in which elements are emphasized. Kananovich (2022), for instance, shows how coverage of the January 6 attack was filtered through national contexts: Canadian media emphasized official sources and law-and-order narratives, whereas Russian outlets downplayed violence and foregrounded protesters' demands. Likewise, Shahin et al. (2016) contend that political culture constrains the degree to which outlets adopt protest paradigm framing. Together, these studies underscore that protest coverage is contingent not only on the protest itself but also on the broader media and political environment.

While early research focuses on newspapers and texts for understanding the protest paradigm, recent work has shifted the attention to social media and multimodal content. Indeed, social media like Facebook and Twitter have become a crucial channel for both media and protesters to spread information and attract audiences (Howard and Hussain 2013). Compared to traditional media, social media enable synchronous communication, and more importantly, multi-modal content in general, and visual content in particular, is prevalent on visual-based platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. This type of content offers more vivid content for user engagement on social media (Lu and Peng 2024). Previous research has found that social media such as Twitter and TikTok are more likely to legitimize protesters instead of undermining them, mainly because social media accounts could quote information provided by local citizens to contextualize protest (Harlow and Johnson 2011; Literat, Boxman-Shabtai, and Kligler-Vilenchik 2023). Moreover, visual content, like infographics and videos, have become prevalent in the coverage of protests, particularly in the frames of *debate* and *riot* (Harlow et al. 2017; Mosallaei 2025). These studies indicate that protest coverage on social media may take on different nuances. The news does not always follow the protest paradigm, and media content tends to involve multimodal rather than texts only.

Despite its utility, the application of the protest paradigm has been constrained by several critical limitations, leaving our understanding incomplete, particularly in the modern global context. First, there is a significant contextual and actor-based gap. The vast body of scholarship is overwhelmingly centered on Western democracies, leaving the paradigm's function within authoritarian systems – where the media operate as instruments of state power – largely under-theorized (Gil-Lopez 2021; Shahin et al. 2016). This focus is compounded by a reliance on single-nation case studies, which prevents the kind of systematic, cross-national comparison needed to reveal overarching patterns of state media strategy. Furthermore, the classic model presumes a clear separation between the state and the media, a distinction that collapses in authoritarian contexts where government agencies themselves are now primary content producers on social media, directly competing in the “struggle for visibility.” The paradigm has not yet fully grappled with what happens when the state is not just a subject of news coverage, but also its source.

Second, a persistent modality and technological gap exists. The literature has long privileged textual analysis, a major oversight in a digital media landscape dominated by visual communication. Visuals are not merely supplementary; they are potent communicative tools that capture attention, bypass cognitive filters to elicit powerful emotional responses, and can convey complex narratives more immediately than text (Bucher and Schumacher 2006; Corrigan-Brown and Wilkes 2012). As protest is an inherently visual expression of dissent (Neumayer and Rossi 2018), ignoring image-based framing is to miss the primary language of modern political contestation. This oversight is magnified by a lack of attention to platform specificity. The techno-commercial logics of platforms like Twitter/X – which algorithmically favor virality, engagement, and spectacle – actively shape which protest frames achieve dominance, a dynamic that remains empirically under-explored at scale.

Visual Protest

Addressing this gap, recent research has begun to foreground the role of visuals in protest communication on digital platforms (Mosallaei 2025). Protests are “essentially a visual expression of dissent,” and hence images render protestors visible or invisible to the public (Neumayer and Rossi 2018, p. 4293). Mainstream news media and citizen journalism actively document and report protestors using cameras and cellphones, and such visual content plays key roles in illustrating and mobilizing protests (Lu and Peng 2024). Posters, banners, and logos related to protests have long been considered as visual materials representing symbolic meanings (Philipps 2012).

Moreover, visual content serves different roles in framing and covering protests. Images, memes, and videos are conceptualized as eye-witnessing that not only documents the violence of protestors but also challenges the mainstream framing of protests (Neumayer and Rossi 2018). Images could legitimize protests by focusing on the police’s disproportionate behaviors; alternative, visual content could highlight the violence of protestors to marginalize protests (Wetzstein 2017). Previous research has found that the use of images is associated with higher levels of civic engagement in protests (Andén-Papadopoulos 2014). Visual content could function as a way of “collective seeing” that constructs audiences’ shared attitudes and knowledge about protests (Jones and Li 2016, p.567). Images also emphasize and amplify protest grievances (Hoffmann and Neumayer 2025). Compared to texts, visual framing of protests is more likely to attract audience engagement on social media, and human-based photos are more effective to other visual content (Lu and Peng 2024).

Nevertheless, it remains uncertain how visual framing of protests adheres to the protest paradigm dominated by textual content. Prior research has revealed that videos could make the coverage of protests more appealing and sympathetic to audiences, thereby challenging the marginalizing role of news media (Mosallaei 2025). In this study, we aim to examine to what extent images produced by authoritarian media follow the protest paradigm, and how their visual reporting of protests might be different across countries. In addition, the protest paradigm may vary depending on whether the protests occur domestically or internationally. Authoritarian media might frame domestic and foreign protests differently to serve various political interests or narratives (Shahin et al. 2016). This potential discrepancy in framing raises questions about how authoritarian regimes utilize visual elements to portray protests occurring within their borders compared to those happening in other countries. Therefore, we propose the following research questions.

RQ1: What is the prevalence of the four protest paradigms – riot, confrontation, spectacle, and debate – in news media reporting in authoritarian countries?

RQ2: How do protest paradigms in media coverage differ between international and domestic protests?

Media Systems in Authoritarian Regimes

National media systems differ significantly across countries, influenced by multiple factors like the structure of the media market and levels of journalistic professionalism (Hallin and Mancini 2004). Current research has shifted from an emphasis on exploring

traditional news media in Western societies to a comparative analysis of media systems in the context of digitalization and globalization (De Leeuw et al. 2020; Flew and Waisbord 2015; Mancini 2020). Of particular interest is to understand media systems beyond the West. Indeed, scholars have examined the structure and features of national media systems in non-western countries, with particular attention to authoritarian regimes such as China (Repnikova 2017; Stockmann 2013) and Russia (Elsawah and Howard 2020).

Previous research on media systems under authoritarian regimes typically emphasizes how news organizations serve as crucial tools of propaganda and manipulation. For instance, scholars have explored the ways in which mass media are utilized by state power to disseminate propaganda and persuade the public in countries like Brazil and China (Brady 2009; Schneider 2019). This body of studies underscores that state authorities actively exercise control over the media for political ends, ensuring that the content produced by these outlets aligns with the agenda and interests of the state's actors (Stockmann 2013). Recently, scholars have expanded the focus from examining domestic media systems to exploring the dynamics of authoritarian media on social media platforms. Research has revealed that authoritarian media adopt Twitter and Facebook to conduct computational propaganda and public diplomacy for the purpose of persuading Western audiences (Crimley et al. 2020; Woolley and Howard 2018). Therefore, it is important to understand how the media system of a country could explain the adherence to the protest paradigm.

News coverage of protests varies across political systems, particularly when comparing democratic and authoritarian regimes. In authoritarian contexts, portrayals are strongly shaped by close ties between media and government. Shahin et al. (2016), in a comparison of China, Brazil, and India, show that Chinese outlets conform closely to the protest paradigm due to state control, while Indian media – shaped by more decentralized politics – offer more nuanced portrayals. This contrast highlights how political structures influence media practices. Further, Otlan et al. (2023) examine a decade of Russian coverage of foreign protests, finding that Russian outlets frequently depict demonstrations in democracies as chaotic and threatening. Such portrayals reinforce state narratives that activism produces instability, legitimizing repression as necessary for order.

In this study, we focus on press freedom as a key contextual factor that shapes the production of protest news. A strong press freedom also suggests that the media system is less susceptible to the control and ownership by state power, thereby enabling news outlets to offer coverage that may diverge from state agendas (Becker, Vlad, and Nusser 2007). Moreover, a high level of press freedom is considered as an indicator of high-quality news and balanced news coverage (Czepek and Hellwig 2009). Thus, in media systems characterized by high press freedom, protest reporting is more likely to offer balanced portrayals of protesters. By contrast, countries with lower levels of press freedom often have state-controlled or state-owned media systems, coupled with restricted information flows. This suggests that news coverage of protests in such environments tends to marginalize protestors, especially those whose actions challenge state authority. As such, we ask:

RQ3: How do media systems influence the adherence to the protest paradigm in these authoritarian nations?

In summary, this study investigates how the protest paradigm – typically marked by delegitimizing portrayals of protest – applies to visual media coverage in non-democratic regimes. We examine whether similar framing strategies appear under authoritarian constraints, how varying media systems influence adherence to the paradigm, and whether domestic protests are framed differently from international ones. By analyzing images from state-controlled and censored outlets, we assess how media freedom shapes visual narratives and how regimes manage internal dissent versus external unrest.

Data and Method

Data

Our dataset comprises 331 million tweets from 9,331 accounts collected between 4 August 2016 and 1 June 2023, based on a curated list from the GWU Library (Littman et al. 2017). A critical methodological step involved geolocating each news outlet account to a specific country. This was done through a two-stage process to ensure accuracy. First, we used GPT-4o and named entity recognition to automatically extract country names from user bios. Then, we conducted a thorough manual validation, where a researcher cross-referenced the AI-generated country labels with the account's self-reported Twitter location, official website, and recent content. This step helped resolve cases involving regional coverage or ambiguous affiliations and corrected potential misclassifications (e.g., references to foreign bureaus). Through this rigorous approach, we confidently assigned accounts to 144 countries.

To identify news outlets from non-democratic states, we used the Polity5 Annual Time Series (1946–2018) from the Center for Systemic Peace (Marshall and Gurr 2020). Polity5 scores regimes from –10 (autocracy) to +10 (democracy), grouping them into autocracies (–10 to –6), anocracies (–5 to +5), and democracies (+6 to +10). Following common practice in comparative politics, we defined non-democratic countries as those scoring below +6, capturing both autocracies and hybrid regimes where media freedom is limited. Using the most recent available scores (mostly from 2018), we applied this classification to our 144 geolocated countries, identifying 44 non-democracies from which our protest image dataset was drawn.

From our dataset of tweets from 44 authoritarian countries, we identified all tweets containing images, yielding 10,383,822 results – 7,434,652 in English and 2,949,170 in other languages. To ensure data quality and reduce noise from low-activity sources, we retained only accounts with at least 1,000 total tweets, regardless of language. This filter ensured that all included accounts reflect established media operations with consistent posting practices. The final non-English dataset included tweets in 34 languages.

To identify protest-related tweets, we applied a curated list of protest-related keywords.¹ Rather than translating all tweets into English and applying English-language filters, we adopted a more efficient and linguistically sensitive approach: we translated our keyword list into each of the 34 identified languages and matched tweets in their original language. After removing duplicate entries, we identified 126,432 unique tweets, each containing a single protest-related image, sourced from 244 verified Twitter news outlet accounts across 38 countries.

To ensure consistency and analytic validity, we further filtered the dataset based on the output of our image classification process. Specifically, we retained only those tweets for which the classification model returned valid binary labels (“Yes” or “No”) for all four protest paradigms – *riot*, *confrontation*, *spectacle*, and *debate*.² We also removed tweets with missing or ambiguous protest context (e.g., those lacking clear domestic or international designation). After applying these filters, the final dataset consisted of 124,301 unique tweets. [Figure 1](#) summarizes the data pipeline, from 331 million tweets to the final protest image corpus.

Image-as-Data: Labeling the Visual Protest Paradigm

To classify each image in our dataset, we employed the GPT-4o vision model. We utilized a zero-shot classification approach, which allows the model to categorize images based on descriptive definitions without requiring prior task-specific training. For this purpose, we developed a detailed prompt that provided the model with precise definitions and key distinguishing features for each of the four protest frames: *riot*, *confrontation*, *spectacle*, and *debate* (the full prompt is available in the [Supplementary Appendix](#)). Because protest images often span frames, the model was instructed to use multi-label classification – evaluating each image across all four categories and assigning multiple labels when needed. For instance, an image of protesters throwing objects at police amid burning barricades could be coded as both *confrontation* and *riot*, while a standoff scene where demonstrators hold large, legible banners could be coded as both *confrontation* and *debate*. This approach captured overlaps rather than forcing images into a single frame.

To assess the validity of the model’s classifications, we used human-annotated ground truth for comparison. This involved a trained research assistant manually coding a stratified random sample of 400 images (100 images selected as

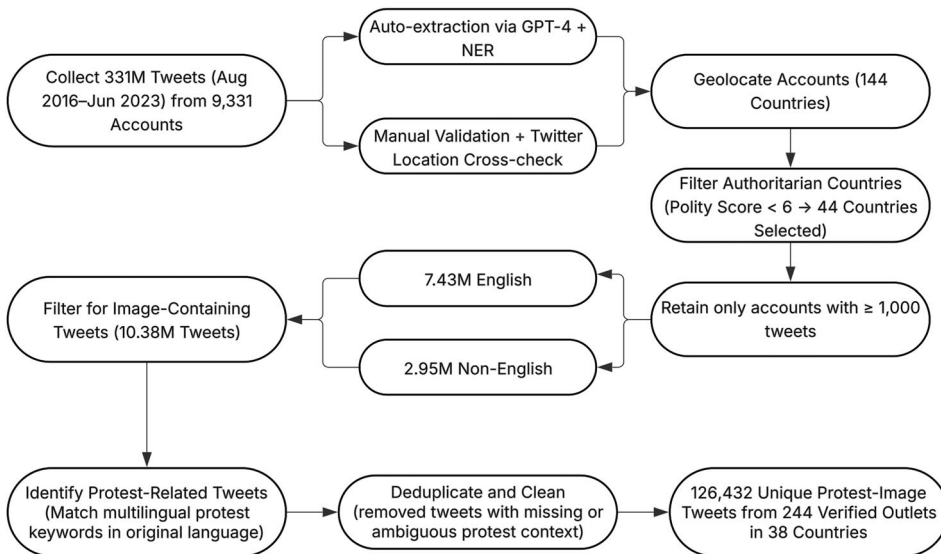


Figure 1. Visual workflow of dataset construction.

representative of each frame) according to the coding protocol outlined in the [Supplementary Appendix](#). We then evaluated the model against human-coded labels, with accuracy scores ranging from 0.80 to 0.92 across categories. Full evaluation metrics are reported in [Supplementary Appendix Table A1](#).

Labeling Domestic vs. International Protest

A central component of our analysis required distinguishing between coverage of domestic and international protests. To achieve this, we developed a two-step computational procedure to classify each tweet based on its geographical context. The first step was to determine the event location. We prompted the GPT-4o model to analyze the full text associated with each tweet and identify the specific country in which the protest action occurred. In the second step, we compared this algorithmically identified event location with the pre-established home country of the news outlet. If the two locations matched, the tweet was coded as domestic; if they differed, it was coded as international. To validate the procedure, we compared model outputs with a human-coded sample of 200 tweets, finding 100% agreement. Details are in the [Supplementary Appendix](#).

Topic Modeling

To analyze the content of tweets containing protest-related images, we applied topic modeling to identify the main themes discussed across both English and non-English posts. All non-English tweets were first translated into English using the Google Translate API³ to ensure consistency. We applied Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), determining the optimal number of topics by comparing models across different topic counts using coherence scores ([Figure A1, Supplementary Appendix](#)). We retained the model with the highest score. [Supplementary Appendix Table A2](#) presents the final topics along with descriptive labels and representative keywords.

Statistical Analysis

To examine how media systems and protest characteristics influence visual framing, we estimated a series of generalized linear mixed-effects models (GLMMs) with a logistic link function. The unit of analysis is the individual tweet, each containing a single protest-related image. We modeled each of the four protest frames – *riot*, *confrontation*, *spectacle*, and *debate* – as a separate binary outcome variable (1 = frame is present, 0 = frame is not present). By modeling each frame independently, we can identify the specific structural and contextual factors that increase or decrease the likelihood of each distinct type of visual framing.

Our key independent variables were: (1) Press Freedom, (2) a binary indicator for Domestic vs. International Protest, (3) the country's Polity Score, (4) the dominant Protest Topic, and (5) an Interaction Term between press freedom and protest type. Each variable was selected for a specific theoretical purpose. The Press Freedom Index proxies media autonomy and state-media relations. While media systems are complex and no single measure is comprehensive, in large-scale cross-national research

– especially across the 38 authoritarian regimes in our study with limited data – the index remains one of the few systematic and widely used indicators (e.g., Jungblut et al. 2024). It provides a grounded, comparable measure of political constraints on journalism. The Domestic vs. International classification allows us to test whether protest framing varies by event location. Polity Scores, though all authoritarian, capture variation in institutional openness that may affect media practice. Protest Topic accounts for issue-specific dynamics, such as differences between labor unrest and civil rights protests. Finally, the interaction term tests whether the effect of press freedom depends on protest location.

Given that protest images are nested within countries, we used GLMMs to account for this hierarchical structure by including random intercepts at the country level. This approach allows us to control for unobserved heterogeneity across countries – such as differences in state-media relations, cultural norms, or editorial practices – that could influence protest framing in ways not fully captured by the observed covariates. By modeling both fixed and random effects, our approach provides more accurate and generalizable estimates of the relationship between media system characteristics and visual protest paradigms. As a robustness check, we assessed multicollinearity among the predictor variables by calculating variance inflation factors (VIFs). We also estimated standard logistic regression models using the same key set of independent variables, excluding random effects.

Results

Before addressing our research questions, we first present illustrative examples of each protest frame to provide visual context for our framework. [Figure 2](#) showcases representative images corresponding to the four frames of protest coverage: *riot*, *confrontation*, *spectacle*, and *debate*. To address privacy and ethical concerns, the faces of individuals in the images have been obscured. Images labeled under the *riot* frame typically depict protest-related violence and destruction, such as looting, fires, chaos, overturned vehicles, or damaged infrastructure. The *confrontation* frame features direct clashes between protesters and law enforcement, often capturing physical altercations, standoffs, or aggressive policing. The *spectacle* frame includes images of large crowds or emotionally charged scenes that dramatize the scale or intensity of the protest, often emphasizing visual impact over informational content. Finally, the *debate* frame is characterized by images that highlight the protesters' demands or messages, commonly through signs, banners, or other forms of visible textual expression. These examples serve to ground our quantitative coding and illustrate the distinct visual logics underpinning each protest frame.

Having established the visual foundation of our framework, we next provide a set of exploratory descriptive results to contextualize the dataset (see [Supplementary Appendix Figures A2–A4](#) and [Tables A3–A5](#)). These materials summarize temporal trends, geographic and linguistic distributions, the composition of media outlets, and the thematic breakdown of protest-related content. Together, these descriptive analyses situate the main findings by highlighting the structural features of the dataset and the heterogeneity of media environments across authoritarian states.



Protest Image — Riot: Violence or destruction.



Protest Image — Confrontation: Clashes with police.



Protest Image — Spectacle: Large crowds or dramatic.



Protest Image — Debate: Protesters' demands or messages.

Figure 2. Representative images for four protest paradigms.

RQ1

To address the first research question (RQ1) regarding the prevalence of the four protest frames, an analysis was conducted on 124,301 tweets from news media reports in authoritarian countries, published between 16 June 2013 and 12 July 2023. The findings (Table 1) show that while all four frames are present, their distribution is

uneven. The *debate* was the most frequent, appearing in 22.84% of cases, followed closely by the *spectacle* (21.7%). In contrast, frames centered on physical conflict were less common, with *confrontation* accounting for 9.72% and *riot* for 7.9% of the tweets. This distribution suggests that media coverage of protests in these contexts tends to emphasize frames of public discourse and large-scale demonstrations over those depicting direct civil disorder.

However, this aggregate finding masks significant variation. A topic-level analysis, detailed in [Figure 3](#), provides a more nuanced explanation for why this pattern emerges. The application of protest frames is not random; it is systematically tied to the subject matter of the protest. The analysis reveals that the less frequent *riot* and *confrontation* frames, while rare overall, are highly concentrated within specific, high-intensity topics. For instance, images related to “Protester-Police Clashes” are overwhelmingly framed as *confrontation* (36.3%) and *riot* (29.5%). This indicates that when the media do employ conflict framing, it is tightly linked to these specific events. Conversely, the overall prevalence of the *debate* and *spectacle* frames is driven by their frequent application to broader civic action topics. As shown in [Figure 3](#), themes like “Activist Movements & Rights” and “Mass Mobilization” are predominantly framed as *debate* or *spectacle*, focusing on grievances and visual scale rather than on disorder.

Therefore, the answer to RQ1 is clarified: authoritarian media do not avoid conflict frames entirely, but rather deploy them selectively for specific types of disruptive events, while defaulting to less threatening frames for more common social and

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of key variables.

Variables	N	Min	Max	Mean/percentage
Polity	124,301	−10	5	−2.4
Press Freedom	124,301	8	70	26.47
Domestic Protest	124,301	0	1	30.05%
Riot	124,301	0	1	7.9%
Confrontation	124,301	0	1	9.72%
Spectacle	124,301	0	1	21.7%
Debate	124,301	0	1	22.84%

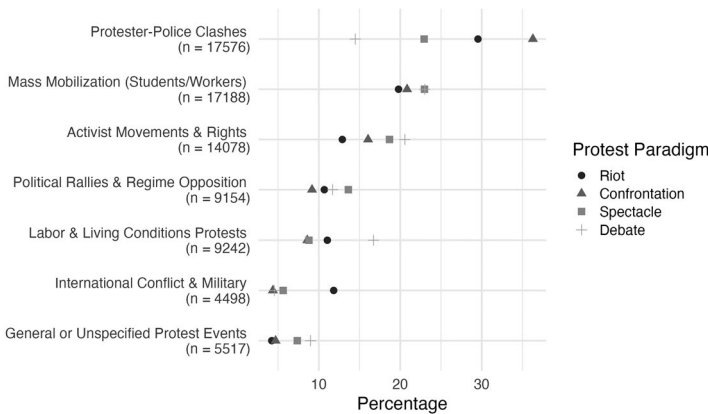


Figure 3. Distribution of protest paradigms across thematic topics.

political movements. This thematic differentiation demonstrates that the visual framing choices are systematic and lend strong empirical support to the theoretical definitions of the protest paradigms (McLeod and Hertog 1999).

RQ2

In addressing the second research question (RQ2), this study employed multilevel logistic regression models to identify the factors influencing protest framing (see Table 2). The analysis confirms that a protest's location (domestic versus foreign) operates as a highly significant determinant of its media portrayal. This is especially clear for conflict-oriented frames; specifically, the odds of a domestic protest being framed as a *riot* are nearly halved ($OR = 0.51, p < 0.001$), and the odds of it being a *confrontation* or a *spectacle* are similarly reduced ($OR = 0.57$ for both, $p < 0.001$). In contrast, domestic protests are 17% more likely to be framed as a *debate* ($OR = 1.17, p < 0.001$). This dichotomous outcome is not random; it points to a deliberate strategy of managing the narrative surrounding internal dissent.

The suppression of the *riot*, *confrontation*, and *spectacle* frames seems a direct tactic to mitigate perceived threats to the regime. According to the protest paradigm literature, the *riot* and *confrontation* frames emphasize chaos, violence, and direct challenges to state authority (McLeod and Hertog 1999). By significantly reducing the likelihood of this type of coverage for domestic events, state-influenced media actively strip these protests of their most threatening characteristics, portraying them as nonviolent and manageable. Similarly, the *spectacle* frame, which captures the visual scale and mobilizing power of a movement, is also suppressed. This is a crucial finding, as it suggests an effort to prevent domestic protests from appearing popular or widespread, thereby limiting their potential to inspire broader public support.

Table 2. Predictors of protest framing: results of multilevel logistic regression analysis.

Predictors	Riot		Confrontation		Spectacle		Debate	
	Odds ratios	<i>p</i> Value	Odds ratios	<i>p</i> Value	Odds ratios	<i>p</i> Value	Odds ratios	<i>p</i> Value
(Intercept)	0.03	<0.001	0.03	<0.001	0.15	<0.001	0.15	<0.001
Protest domestic (Yes)	0.51	<0.001	0.57	<0.001	0.57	<0.001	1.17	<0.001
Press freedom	1.33	0.015	1.31	0.018	1.14	0.152	0.99	0.915
Polity score	0.88	0.296	0.84	0.148	0.97	0.799	1.05	0.748
Protest domestic (yes) × Press freedom	0.95	0.058	0.99	0.780	0.98	0.324	1.04	0.031
Topics as control	Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes	
Random effects								
σ^2	3.29		3.29		3.29		3.29	
τ_{00}	0.27 country		0.25 country		0.19 country		0.43 country	
ICC	0.08		0.07		0.05		0.11	
<i>N</i>	38 country		38 country		38 country		38 country	
Observations	124,301		124,301		124,301		124,301	
Marginal R^2 /conditional R^2	0.098/0.165		0.127/0.188		0.085/0.135		0.059/0.167	

The table presents odds ratios from logistic regression predicting four frames. Each odds ratio reflects how the likelihood of an event changes with a one-unit increase in the predictor variables, holding other variables constant. An odds ratio greater than 1 indicates an increased likelihood of the event, while a value less than 1 suggests a decreased likelihood. Significance levels are indicated by *p* values.

Conversely, the strategic elevation of the *debate* frame is the most nuanced element of this strategy. Rather than employing complete censorship, this approach allows grievances to be aired within a controlled, verbal context. This resonates with literature suggesting that sophisticated authoritarian regimes prefer co-optation and discourse management over pure repression (Gil-Lopez 2021). By framing domestic protests as a “debate,” the media shift the focus from contested physical spaces to a contained rhetorical sphere. This allows the state to project an image of tolerance and democratic responsiveness – seemingly engaging with protester demands—while simultaneously de-escalating the situation on the ground and avoiding visuals of mass defiance.

This entire media strategy serves as a powerful illustration of “authoritarian mirroring” (Shahin et al. 2016), in which regimes present two contrasting narratives of protest. Internally, the narrative is one of stability, where dissent is a matter of manageable debate. Externally, by implication, the frames suppressed for domestic events (*riot*, *confrontation*, *spectacle*) are reserved for depicting foreign protests as chaotic, violent, and illegitimate. Ultimately, this dual-pronged approach to framing is more than simple propaganda; it is a fundamental and sophisticated tool for maintaining regime stability in the modern information environment. By simultaneously minimizing internal threats and maximizing external ones, the state actively shapes the political imagination of its citizenry, a core tactic of modern informational autocracy (Guriev and Treisman 2019; Roberts 2018). This strategy reinforces the regime’s indispensability as the sole guarantor of order in a seemingly turbulent world, thereby securing its legitimacy and managing public perception with a subtlety that pure repression cannot achieve.

RQ3

The third research question (RQ3) explores how media system characteristics, specifically press freedom, shape protest framing in authoritarian nations. The regression results from Table 2 indicate a complex relationship that both aligns with and extends existing literature. The analysis reveals that greater press freedom is significantly associated with a substantial increase in conflict-oriented frames. For each one-unit increase in press freedom, the odds of a protest being framed as a *riot* increase by 33% (OR = 1.33, $p=0.015$) and as a *confrontation* by 31% (OR = 1.31, $p=0.018$). This finding resonates with the foundational protest paradigm literature (e.g., McLeod and Hertog 1999), which suggests that conflict and violence are inherently newsworthy. In this context, it appears that even a marginal increase in media freedom does not automatically lead to more substantive coverage, but rather allows journalists to default to dramatic, attention-grabbing frames that emphasize disorder.

The influence of press freedom on the *debate* and *spectacle* frames reveals a more nuanced strategy of media management. The data show no significant direct effect of press freedom on these frames overall. However, a statistically significant interaction (OR = 1.04, $p = 0.031$) reveals that as press freedom increases, the likelihood of a *domestic* protest being framed as a *debate* also slightly increases. This finding is critical when viewed through the lens of modern authoritarianism research (e.g., Gil-Lopez 2021). It suggests a sophisticated strategy beyond mere repression: regimes may

tolerate marginal press freedom as a “safety valve,” allowing domestic dissent to be channeled into a controlled, verbal “debate” rather than a physically disruptive *spectacle* or *confrontation*. This approach creates an illusion of responsiveness and a functioning public sphere without conceding actual power.

Rather than being a monolithic force for democratic discourse, its effects are conditional and appear to be co-opted into a broader state strategy. The strong positive association between press freedom and conflict-oriented frames (*riot*, *confrontation*) aligns with journalistic norms that prioritize sensational, high-impact news. This natural media tendency can be strategically leveraged by the state, especially in its framing of foreign rivals, to project an image of external chaos. Simultaneously, the subtle but significant interaction effect – whereby greater press freedom facilitates a “debate” frame specifically for domestic issues – acts as a crucial internal regulating mechanism. This allows for a limited, controlled ventilation of grievances, which can enhance regime legitimacy by creating an illusion of responsiveness. This dynamic suggests an advanced form of media management that moves beyond simple censorship to the cultivation of a complex information environment, where even the “freer” elements can be managed to ensure regime stability. To ensure robustness, we tested for multicollinearity ([Supplementary Appendix Table A6](#)), which was not a concern. Full regression results with topic controls are reported in [Supplementary Appendix Table A7](#), and robustness checks using standard logistic models ([Supplementary Appendix Table A8](#)) confirmed the main findings.

Limitations

This study offers a novel analysis of the protest paradigm using visual content from authoritarian news outlets on Twitter, but several limitations apply. First, focusing solely on Twitter limits generalizability to regions or platforms where it is less accessible. In places like China, Twitter reflects outward-facing communication rather than the domestic media sphere. Moreover, because our dataset includes only outlets with a substantial Twitter presence, it may underrepresent contexts with weaker media sectors, lower internet penetration, or tighter regime control. Second, the analysis is limited to still images, excluding other formats like videos or captioned visuals that may convey protests differently. Third, about 2.4% of image links were inaccessible during analysis, creating minor gaps in coverage. Fourth, we used machine translation for multilingual tweets, enabling cross-national comparison but potentially missing linguistic nuance – future work could apply more advanced multilingual natural language processing (NLP). Fifth, our frame-based coding may overlook visual tropes such as symbolic gestures or identity markers; integrating iconographic analysis could capture these meanings. Sixth, while we identify general patterns in visual framing, they may obscure cultural or historical differences in interpretation across countries. Lastly, while the press freedom index is an imperfect proxy for media–state dynamics, it remains a theoretically grounded and widely used cross-national measure, especially where typologies like Hallin and Mancini are unavailable for authoritarian regimes. We apply it cautiously and note that future work could add structural indicators – such as economic development, internet access, or media market size – for fuller contextualization of protest framing.

Discussion

This study contributes to protest coverage research with the first large-scale, cross-national analysis of the visual protest paradigm in non-democratic contexts. Evidence from 38 countries affirms its relevance while suggesting it functions not only as a tool of marginalization but also as an instrument of statecraft. First, in our descriptive estimates, while all four protest frames are present, the most frequently depicted frames are *debate* (22.8%) and *spectacle* (21.7%), rather than those focused solely on conflict or deviance. Within our sample, this complicates the monolithic view of the authoritarian media as relying primarily on delegitimizing tactics such as *riot* and *confrontation*. While foundational literature on the protest paradigm highlights the media's tendency to portray protesters as threatening or criminal (Boykoff 2006; Snow, Vliegenthart, and Corrigan-Brown 2007), our findings suggest a more nuanced strategy of narrative management in non-democratic settings. Authoritarian media in our sample appear to favor co-optation and controlled discourse, aligning with scholarship that shows *debate* and *spectacle* frames are often used to quote official sources and reinforce dominant systems (Boyle, McLeod, and Armstrong 2012; Harlow and Johnson 2011). By elevating the *debate* frame, state-influenced outlets construct a "schema of interpretation" (Harlow et al. 2017) that acknowledges protester grievances within a tightly managed rhetorical space – projecting an image of responsiveness and stability (Gil-Lopez 2021), rather than chaos or repression.

Second, our results offer cross-national evidence that aligns with the dynamics described by the concept of "authoritarian mirroring," which has previously been examined in comparative case studies (Shahin et al. 2016). Our finding that domestic protests are systematically shielded from *riot*, *confrontation*, and *spectacle* frames – while being funneled into the *debate* frame – is the core of this strategy. This aligns perfectly with recent work demonstrating how Russian media frame foreign protests as chaotic and threatening to reinforce state narratives at home (Kananovich 2022; Otlán et al. 2023). Our cross-national findings suggest this is not an isolated tactic but a widespread visual strategy. Authoritarian media leverage their role as propaganda tools on global platforms (Crilley et al. 2020; Stockmann 2013) to create a stark visual dichotomy: foreign dissent is chaotic and dangerous, while domestic dissent is a manageable conversation.

Third, our findings speak to the relationship between press freedom and protest coverage in authoritarian contexts. While one might assume that greater press freedom leads to more balanced or sympathetic portrayals of protesters (Becker, Vlad, and Nusser 2007; Czeppek and Hellwig 2009), our results reveal a more paradoxical dynamic. Specifically, greater press freedom significantly increases the likelihood of conflict-oriented framing: the odds of a protest being depicted through *riot* and *confrontation* frames rise by 33% and 31%, respectively. This aligns with scholarship on the "spectacle of violence" (Juris 2005), which suggests that even a relatively freer press – operating under professional journalistic norms – is more drawn to dramatic and sensational imagery. In these cases, the logic of newsworthiness may override a logic of solidarity, particularly when coverage comes from established news outlets rather than grassroots or alternative media (Brown and Mourão 2021; Harlow et al. 2020). However, the interaction effects tell a deeper story. We also find that greater

press freedom slightly increases the odds of domestic protests being framed as *debate*, indicating that press freedom in these regimes may function less as an independent democratic force and more as a managed “safety valve.” Regimes appear to tolerate or even strategically exploit a freer press: allowing it to channel conflict narratives toward foreign dissent while framing domestic protests as controlled debates. In this way, media autonomy is selectively permitted – not to challenge the regime, but to sustain its image of responsiveness, stability, and legitimacy both at home and abroad.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study reconceptualizes the visual protest paradigm as a sophisticated instrument of statecraft in authoritarian regimes. Our findings show a calculated strategy where domestic dissent is managed through controlled “debate” frames, while foreign protests are framed as chaotic. This research has broader implications for understanding the dynamics of protest mobilization and media power in constrained environments.

The primary implication is that this dual framing strategy creates a calibrated ambiguity that can effectively chill participation. For domestic citizens, the state-sponsored visibility of a “debate” frame may signal a limited opening for expressing grievances. However, the simultaneous, harsh framing of foreign protests serves as a veiled threat, demonstrating what could happen if dissent escalates beyond acceptable bounds. This strategic uncertainty complicates a potential activist’s “calculus of risk,” discouraging mobilization by making the state’s response unpredictable. The media, in this model, do not just inform or suppress; it actively manages the public’s perception of what is possible and what is perilous.

Furthermore, this study demonstrates how authoritarian states skillfully exploit the inherent biases of social media platforms. The “authoritarian mirroring” strategy is so effective precisely because it aligns with the “social media logic” (Poell and Van Dijck 2015) that governs these spaces. This logic, driven by algorithms that favor engagement and virality, naturally privileges spectacular, emotional, and conflict-oriented content. The *riot* and *confrontation* frames used for foreign protests are perfectly suited for this environment, designed to travel widely and capture attention. In contrast, the more staid, less visually arresting *debate* frame used for domestic issues is less likely to spread organically, effectively containing the narrative. While other studies show that activists or alternative media can use these same platforms to build solidarity with legitimizing frames (Brown and Mourão 2021; Harlow et al. 2020), our findings reveal how powerful state actors can weaponize platform logics to achieve the opposite effect on a massive scale. This study’s methodological contribution – demonstrating the viability of computational methods for analyzing visual paradigms at scale – opens the door for future research to explore these dynamics further. Future work should combine our large-scale approach with qualitative deep dives to explore how these hegemonic, algorithmically amplified frames are received, contested, and interpreted by audiences on the ground.

Notes

1. The relevant keywords used to identify protest-related content include: *protest*, *protests*, *protesting*, *protestor*, *protestors*, *rally*, *rallies*, *riot*, *riots*, *uprising*, *uprisings*, *social movement*, *social movements*, *social-movement*, *social-movements*, *strike*, *strikes*, *boycott*, *boycotts*,

civil disobedience, civil-disobedience, activism, activist, activists, revolt, revolts, rebellion, and rebellions.

2. A subset of images could not be classified because the model returned non-interpretable outputs, such as generic error messages or refusals to respond. These failures typically occurred when image URLs had expired, the image quality was low-resolution, the content was visually ambiguous, or the format was unsupported (e.g., GIF thumbnails or animated media). In such cases, the model was unable to extract sufficient visual information to render a confident or consistent judgment across the four protest paradigms. To preserve the integrity and interpretability of the dataset, these images were excluded from the final analysis.
3. Translations were performed using the Google Cloud Translation API (<https://cloud.google.com/translate>), which supports over 100 languages and is widely used for machine translation in multilingual NLP applications.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Wei Zhong**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Bin Chen**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Fan Liang**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Maggie Mengqing Zhang**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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