

# THE POLITICAL TERROR SCALE

Mark Gibney and Matthew Dalton

---

Since the early 1980s, a group of human rights scholars and students at Purdue University have produced the Political Terror Scale (PTS), the results of which are produced in Table 1.<sup>1</sup> Countries are coded on a scale of 1-5 according to their level of terror the previous year according to the descriptions of these countries provided in the *Amnesty International* and *U.S. State Department Country Reports*.<sup>2</sup> The various levels are set forth below:

- Level 1: Countries ... under a secure rule of law, people are not imprisoned for their views, and torture is rare or exceptional.... Political murders are extraordinarily rare.
- Level 2: There is a limited amount of imprisonment for nonviolent political activity. However, few are affected, torture and beatings are exceptional .... Political murder is rare.
- Level 3: There is extensive political imprisonment, or a recent history of such imprisonment. Execution or other political murders and brutality may be common. Unlimited detention, with or without trial, for political views is accepted....

---

Policy Studies and Developing Nations, Volume 4, pages 73-84.  
Copyright © 1996 by JAI Press Inc.  
All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.  
ISBN: 0-7623-0036-1

- Level 4: The practices of the Level 3 are expanded to larger numbers. Murders, disappearances, and torture are a common part of life.... In spite of its generality, on this level violence affects primarily those who interest themselves in politics or ideas.
- Level 5: The violence of Level 4 has been extended to the whole population.... The leaders of these societies place no limits on the means or thoroughness with which they pursue personal or ideological goals.

In addition, coders are provided with the following additional instructions.

1. *Ignore Own Biases.* Coders should make every attempt to keep their own biases out of their work. Thus, coders are instructed to ignore their preconceptions of a country, and to limit their coding to the information provided in the country report.
2. *Give Countries the Benefit of the Doubt.* Coders also are instructed to give the benefit of the doubt in favor of the countries they are coding. Thus, if a coder thinks that a country could be scored as either a level 2 or a level 3, the country is to receive the lower score. Sometimes coders will not feel comfortable making a choice between two levels. In those instances, coders will oftentimes score a country using both numbers, such as 2/3. If the other coder has either of these numbers, we use the level where there is agreement.

One of the more difficult problems is how to deal with the situation where a country's human rights situation changes dramatically during the course of the year. It is not out of the ordinary for a newly installed regime to pursue policies that are diametrically opposed to that which preceded it. In these instances we instruct the coders to consider when the regime change occurred. For example, if a repressive regime was ousted late in the calendar year, the score probably should reflect the human rights situation that existed for most of the year. On the other hand, if the change occurred anywhere near the middle of the year or before then, the score should reflect this change.

3. *Consider the Size of the Country Being Coded.* Coders are instructed to be sensitive to the size of the countries they are coding. For example, six hundred political prisoners in a small country represents a much different phenomenon than the same number in a much larger country, and thus, should be coded differently.
4. *View the Various Levels as Part of a Continuum.* The PTS provides us with ordinal rankings of levels of human rights abuses. Countries with higher scores should experience higher numbers of deaths, torture, and political imprisonment than those ranked below them. In addition,

countries with the same score should experience approximately the same level of political terror (but also reflecting the size of the countries), although it might not occur in the same manner. For example, one country might have a large number of political prisoners, but very few summary executions or disappearances. Another country might have the exact opposite scenario. Still, it is quite possible for both countries to have the same score. Coders are instructed to be sensitive to these kinds of trade-offs, and to attempt to reflect the relative level of human rights abuses in the countries they are coding.

Related to this, it is important that the various levels not be interpreted so literally that one misses the essence of what the PTS is attempting to measure. For example, the essence of what differentiates Level 4 from Level 5 countries is that in the former certain sectors of the population are singled out for widespread terror, while in the latter terror afflicts nearly the entire population. Despite this theoretical distinction, however, sometimes the level of political terror in a country will be so great—although it is only aimed at certain segments of the population—that it still warrants a level 5. To use an illustration, even if Hitler had only singled out one group, Jews, for persecution, the level of terror in Nazi Germany still would have been a level 5.

One of the areas where the PTS seems weakest is in differentiating between countries at the highest level. For example, a medium sized country where torture is systematic and upwards of 1300 people have been killed that year, either by summary execution, disappearance, or as casualties in a civil war, will very likely be coded a level 5. A country where ten times that number were killed will also receive a 5. Is political terror in the second country worse than in the first? The answer clearly is yes, yet the PTS treats these two countries as essentially experiencing the same levels of political terror. On the other hand, it could be rationalized that life is hell in both countries.

1. *Try to Measure Government Terror, but Ultimately be Sensitive to all Forms of Terror.* The PTS attempts to measure government terror. However, the coders also are instructed not to ignore other forms of terror from non-governmental actors. The aim is to reflect the human rights violations that exist in a country more generally. Usually this does not pose a problem. High levels of human rights abuses by insurgents are all too often matched by similar practices of governments. One country that posed a particular problem for a number of years was Lebanon. For the most part it has been extraordinarily difficult to discern between the terrorist activities of the government (if there was one in anything but name only) and various other factions. As a consequence, for many years Lebanon was not given a score.

2. *Try to Read What the Reports are Trying to Say.* One reason why certain Central American countries such as El Salvador and Guatemala were coded as a 4 rather than as a Level 5 (using the State Department) during the early 1980s is that the Reports on these countries would be replete with praise of the "improvements" occurring in the area of human rights, or else the language with regard to atrocities would be couched in terms of "unconfirmed reports." The point is that it is important to discern what the reports are trying to say. One key is the adjectives employed. For example, "systematic" torture represents a more serious human rights violation than the mention that torture commonly occurs.

In this same vein, there have been some instances where a country's human rights record is described in narrative form as being quite bad, but where there is very little evidence in the report itself of either summary executions, disappearances, torture or substantial numbers of political prisoners (the State Department Reports on Cuba are probably the best example of this). It is important to note that the PTS only measures *actual* terror. Thus, repressive regimes such as the former Eastern-bloc countries that previously had effectively cowered their populations would not have exhibited the highest abuses of terror according to the PTS, although it is very unlikely that they will be coded as a Level 1 or 2 country either.

### THE CODING PROCESS

The way we have proceeded is to have at least two people code the pertinent countries,<sup>3</sup> and then a third party (usually Gibney) attempt to resolve any conflicts between the coders by employing a rule of majority vote (invariably two out of three). Coders are asked to provide a score and a few comments rationalizing their decision. Inter-coder reliability between the two original coders is in the range of 70-90 percent. Usually, however, a more informal means of dispute resolution is employed. Oftentimes where there is disagreement the original coders will be asked to re-read certain country reports. After this, it is not unusual for a fair amount of discussion to ensue concerning why certain countries were given the scores they had been given. In nearly every instance, then, there eventually is unanimity. Where the various parties simply cannot agree, the lower score is used.

### EXAMPLES OF VARIOUS LEVELS

In order to more fully explain the PTS, listed below are various examples of different levels of political terror from various years and some of the pertinent language from these reports.

## Examples of Level 5 Countries

*Columbia 1991* (State Department)

Members and units of the army and the police participated in a number of human rights violations. Particularly in areas of guerilla violence and little civilian presence, members of the armed forces committed various abuses, including massacres, disappearances, and torture (p. 534). . . . [T]he center for Investigations and Popular Education (CINEP), Bogota's Jesuit-affiliated human rights and social research institution, gives a credible figure of 398 confirmed political killings in Columbia through October 1991 . . . . CINEP labeled an additional 1,029 murders as presumably politically motivated . . . . These numbers exclude deaths in combat (p. 535).

A disproportionately high number of victims of violence are peasants and workers. In his annual report the Procurador noted that he had files on more than 68 reported massacres by security forces (p. 537). . . . Both disappearances and kidnappings increased in 1991 (p. 538). . . . Although torture is prohibited by law, the police and security forces frequently beat and torture detainees, especially in the period immediately following detention (p. 539).

*Afghanistan 1985* (State Department)

An already bad human rights situation deteriorated still further in 1985. Basic rights continued to be violated on a magnitude unprecedented in recent Afghan history. Military and KHAD [Soviet supported secret police] forces carried out systematic violations of the human rights of Afghans on a grand scale . . . . Urban centers were repeatedly bombed and strafed by aircraft and subjected to mortar and artillery bombardment. Large-scale military operations were mounted with scant regard for—and at times with deliberate intent to cause—death and injury to innocent civilians (p. 1163).

*Guatemala 1990* (Amnesty International)

Reports were received of hundreds of "disappearances" and extrajudicial executions, continuing the pattern of gross abuses reported over more than two decades (p. 101). . . . The abuses were reported in the context of a continuing insurgency, and the government and military periodically charged that the armed opposition had carried out torture and murder, although details of individual cases were rarely conclusive (p. 102).

## Examples of Level 4 Countries

*The Philippines 1990* (Amnesty International).

Scores of people were believed to have been extrajudicially executed and at least 50 others reportedly "disappeared" in police or military custody (p. 185). . . . Tens of thousands of people were forced to leave their homes and there was widespread destruction and loss of life . . . as a result of the bombing by government forces of villages suspected of harbouring [opposition] forces (p. 186).

*Libya 1987* (Amnesty International).

The killings of Libyans abroad and the execution of prisoners in Libya, in apparent implementation of the official "physical liquidation" policy against political opponents, continued. Hundreds of prisoners of conscience and political prisoners were believed to be held without charge.... Many prisoners were said to be held in secret detention centres and to be at risk of torture.

## Examples of Level 3 Countries

*Cuba 1991* (State Department).

In mid-November, Cuban authorities unleashed a wave of repression ... largely through the use of "acts of repudiation"—attacks by officially organized mobs that are portrayed as being spontaneous public rebukes of dissident activity (pp. 553-554).... In 1991 there were at least six cases of probable extrajudicial killings by the security forces (p. 554).

There were no credible reports of politically motivated disappearances in 1991 (p. 554).... The Constitution prohibits abusive treatment of detainees and prisoners. However, beatings, neglect, isolation, and other abuse by prison officials are directed at those prisoners who have been convicted of political crimes (including human rights advocates) or are unwilling to conform (p. 554).... Human rights activists and political dissidents are systematically harassed and abused in public and private (p. 555).

*Ghana 1982* (Amnesty International).

Amnesty International was concerned about reports of arbitrary arrest, beatings and killings by members of the security services, particularly the army (p. 41).... The PNDC [Provisional National Defence Council] government was installed on 31 December 1981 as a result of a military coup, and a high level of violence continued throughout 1982. The most widely reported of the political killings during 1982 occurred on 30 June when three High Court judges and a retired army major were abducted from their homes during curfew hours and shot (p. 41).

Amnesty International investigated reports that both political and criminal detainees were beaten by soldiers during or shortly after their arrest. Such ill-treatment was most commonly alleged at Burma Camp, the main military barracks (p. 42).

## Examples of Level 2 Countries

*Congo 1985* (State Department).

The human rights situation in the Congo changed little in 1985. No organized opposition to the Government is permitted. In November, the Congo experienced the first open unrest since President Sassou took power. High school students rioted in Brazzaville to protest a new government policy on college scholarships. The military put down the rioting, killing four students and severely wounding at least seven. The DSGE [state security apparatus] has been criticized by Amnesty International for use of torture (p. 82).

*Cameroon 1987 (Amnesty International).*

At least 40 political prisoners were held in Cameroon throughout 1987, most after unfair trials following a coup attempt in April 1984 (p. 27).... An unknown number of death sentences were imposed and there were at least two executions during the year. Most death sentences were imposed for murder, but they were also imposed in at least five cases for "aggravated theft", a broadly defined offence (p. 28).

## Examples of Level 1 Countries

*Benin 1991 (State Department).*

The human rights situation in Benin continued to improve throughout 1991. The transitional government and the newly elected Government respected the fundamental human rights provided for in the Constitution of December 1990 (p. 10).... There were no reports of political or extrajudicial killings. However, there were isolated instances of violence and at least one death in the northern region in connection with the elections during a confrontation between supporters of different candidates (p. 11).... There were no reports of disappearances (p. 11).

The 1990 Constitution forbids torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. With public attention focused on past incidents and on bringing to justice those who committed acts of torture under the old regime, there were no reports of torture in 1991 (p. 11).

*Oman 1991 (State Department).*

A number of human rights continued to be tightly restricted in 1991, particularly the freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association, the right of citizens to change the government, and worker rights. Various forms of discrimination against women continued to occur, and there were occasional reports of abuse of foreign workers. Civil and political rights are not formally codified. In the absence of any challenge to the current order, the authorities usually respect the integrity of the individual (p. 1539).

There were no known political or extrajudicial killings in 1991.... There were no reports of disappearances.... Torture or other forms of cruel punishment are not systematically practiced or countenanced by Omani authorities (p. 1539).

## NOTES

1. Contributions for this project have come from other institutions and individuals as well. For example, Steven Poe of the University of North Texas has been responsible for some of the PTS data, as has Alberto Jongmann at Leiden University in the Netherlands.

The data from this coding has been used in a variety of contexts measuring various aspects of U.S. foreign assistance and refugee policy. See, for example, Stohl, Carleton and Johnson (1984, pp. 125-126); Stohl and Carleton (1985, pp. 205-229); Gibney (1987, pp. 109-121); Gibney and Stohl (1988); Poe (1990, pp. 499-512, 1991a, 1991b, pp. 295-316, 1992, pp. 147-167); Lindren (1991, pp. 295-316); Hauchler (1991); and Gibney, Dalton and Vockell (1992, pp. 33-46) In addition, the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada has used the Political Terror Scale in refugee and asylum determinations.

2. For a further description of the PTS and its use in examining political terror over the past decade, see the chapter by McCann and Gibney in this volume.
3. For the Amnesty Reports the coders read the entire report for each country. For the State Department the coders read the Introduction and Section 1.

## REFERENCES

- Gibney, M. 1987. "A 'Well-Founded Fear' of Persecution." *Human Rights Quarterly* 10: 109-121.
- Gibney, M. and M. Stohl. 1988. "Human Rights and U.S. Refugee Policy." In *Open Borders? Closed Societies?: The Ethical and Political Issues*, edited by M. Gibney. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Hauchler, I. 1991. *Global Trends*. Bonn: Fischer, Taschenbuch Verlag.
- McCann, J.A. and M. Gibney. 1996. "An Overview of Political Terror in the Developing World, 1980-1991." In *Policy Studies and Developing Nations*, edited by S. Nagel and D.L. Cingranelli. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Poo, S. 1990. "Human Rights and Foreign Aid: A Review of Quantitative Research and Prescriptions for Future Research." *Human Rights Quarterly* 12: 499-512.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1991a. "Human Rights and the Allocation of U.S. Military Assistance." *Journal of Peace Research* 28: 1-12.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1991b. "U.S. Economic Aid Allocation: The Quest for Cumulation." *International Interactions* 16: 295-316.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1992. "Human Rights and Economic Aid: Aid Allocation under Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter." *American Journal of Political Science* 36: 147-167.
- Stohl, M. and D. Carleton. 1985. "The Foreign Policy of Human Rights: Rhetoric and Reality from Jimmy Carter to Ronald Reagan." *Human Rights Quarterly* 7: 205-229.
- Stohl, M., D. Carleton and S. Johnson. 1984. "Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Assistance from Nixon to Carter." *Journal of Peace Research* 21: 125-126.