BEYOND CONSOLIDATING POWER: THE LOGIC AND ADAPTABILITY OF POLITICAL PURGES IN STALIN'S SOVIET UNION, SADDAM'S IRAQ, AND THE ASSAD'S SYRIA

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ABSTRACT:

This study analyzes the role of purges as systemic mechanisms of governance within Stalin's Soviet Union, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and Assad's Syria. While commonly perceived as instruments for power consolidation, this paper argues that purges extend beyond tactical purposes to function as institutionalized practices. These mechanisms enforced elite loyalty, restructured power dynamics, and suppressed dissent, serving as adaptive strategies for authoritarian resilience. The analysis identifies shared patterns, such as a dual-phase structure targeting external threats before focusing on internal rivals, while also exploring ideological, structural, and personalist dimensions. Despite ideological differences—Marxist-Leninist revolution in Stalin's USSR, Ba'athist Arab nationalism in Iraq, and sectarian authoritarianism in Syria—the study reveals a universal adaptability of purges to the vulnerabilities of authoritarian regimes. Using Wintrobe's (1998) concept of the "fear equilibrium" and Tilly's (2003) theory of institutionalized violence, this comparative framework advances the understanding of authoritarian resilience and the strategic role of violence in state control.

KEYWORDS: Political Purges, Authoritarianism, Stalinism, Ba'athist Ideology, Sectarian Violence, Institutionalized Fear.

Introduction

Political purges are among the most profound manifestations of authoritarian governance, transcending ideological, structural, and cultural contexts. From Joseph Stalin's Great Terror (1936–1938) to Saddam Hussein's sectarian-driven eliminations within Iraq's Ba'ath Party (1979-2003) and the Assad regime's calculated purges and sectarian targeting in Syria, these acts have served not only as tactical tools for eliminating opposition but also as systemic mechanisms for embedding fear and ensuring control. Saddam Hussein, like Assad, relied heavily on sectarian policies, favoring Sunni Arabs to consolidate power while systematically marginalizing and suppressing other groups. The result in both cases was the creation of a police state where surveillance and fear permeated society, and individuals were expected to be constantly watched, fostering an environment of mistrust and compliance.

While often analyzed through the lens of power consolidation, purges also function as institutionalized practices of governance, serving as both proactive and reactive mechanisms tailored to the unique vulnerabilities of authoritarian regimes. Beyond eliminating immediate threats, purges create a climate of systemic control, where fear and uncertainty suppress dissent and foster compliance. These practices are deeply embedded within the fabric of authoritarian governance, allowing regimes to adapt their strategies to shifting political, social, and economic landscapes. By targeting opposition, restructuring state institutions such as army, security and court, and reinforcing loyalty among elites, purges become a vital tool for sustaining dominance over time, ensuring that even as challenges arise, the regime's grip on power remains unyielding.

Existing scholarship provides valuable insights into individual regimes but often lacks a comparative perspective. Research on Stalin's Soviet Union, for instance, underscores how Marxist-Leninist ideology framed purges as essential to revolutionary progress, targeting "class enemies" and political rivals as existential threats to socialism (Conquest, 2008; Getty & Naumov, 1999). In Saddam Hussein's Iraq, purges were rooted in Ba'athist Arab nationalism and tribal networks, aiming to reinforce Sunni Arab dominance while marginalizing Shia and Kurdish communities (Sassoon, 2012; Makiya, 1998). Similarly, studies on the Assad regime highlight how sectarianism and Ba'athist rhetoric drove the targeting of Sunni opposition groups and rival elites to consolidate Alawite hegemony in a Sunni-majority society (Dagher, 2019; Daher, 2020). While these studies deepen the understanding of individual cases, they often overlook the shared logic of purges as a universal mechanism of authoritarian governance.

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This study addresses a critical gap in the literature by conducting a comparative analysis of Stalin's Soviet Union, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and the Assad regimes in Syria, spanning the leadership of Hafez al-Assad and Bashar al-Assad. These cases were selected for their ideological and structural diversity—ranging from Marxist-Leninist Communism to Ba'athist Arab nationalism to sectarian authoritarianism—providing a robust framework for understanding how purges operate across distinct political, cultural, and societal contexts.

Although Saddam Hussein's Iraq and the Assad regimes in Syria were ideologically aligned with socialist-nationalist principles influenced by the USSR, their strategies for implementing purges diverged due to distinct structural and societal realities. Saddam relied on his Sunni Arab minority, particularly tribal networks from Tikrit, to dominate Iraq's majority-Shi'a population and to suppress the sizable Kurdish minority. This tribal framework positioned purges as tools for managing Iraq's deeply rooted ethno-sectarian divisions, reinforcing Sunni dominance within the state apparatus (Sassoon, 2012; Hiltermann, 2007). Conversely, the Assad regimes based their authority on the Alawite sect, embedding loyalists in key government and military institutions to maintain control over Syria's Sunni majority. This sectarian approach underpinned the Assad regime's purges, which were justified through narratives of counterterrorism and state unity (Dagher, 2019; Daher, 2020, 2019).

In contrast, Stalin's purges unfolded within a centralized, ideologically rigid state apparatus deeply influenced by Marxist-Leninist principles. These purges targeted "class enemies" such as kulaks and "counterrevolutionaries" within the Communist Party, aligning with the Soviet Union's broader goals of revolutionary transformation. Stalin's centralized mechanisms, including the NKVD, facilitated the systematic elimination of political rivals and societal groups deemed threats to socialist progress (Conquest, 2008; Khlevniuk, 2015).

Despite these contextual differences, all three regimes share striking commonalities in their use of purges as dual-phase strategies. Initially, purges focused on external opposition—whether kulaks in Stalin's Soviet Union, communists, Kurds and Shia in Saddam's Iraq, or Sunni Islamist and intellectual groups under the Assad regime. Subsequently, they turned inward to eliminate rivals within elite networks, such as Bolshevik leaders during Stalin's Great Terror, high-ranking Ba'athists during Saddam's 1979 purge, and military officers and Sunni activists under Hafiz and Bashar al-Assad during the Syrian Civil War (Van Dam, 2011; Karsh & Rautsi, 1991). This dual-phase structure highlights the dual function of purges as tactical responses to immediate threats and systemic mechanisms for consolidating power and restructuring state institutions.

Stalin's reliance on a centralized bureaucratic state allowed for highly organized purges targeting class enemies and political elites, institutionalizing repression within the NKVD. In contrast, Saddam Hussein's regime employed purges within Iraq's fragmented tribal and sectarian framework, using tribal networks to enforce loyalty while justifying mass violence—such as the Al-Anfal genocide—through Ba'athist ideological narratives (Human Rights Watch, 1993; Kirmanj and Rafaat, 2021).

The Assad regimes adapted purges to their sectarian context, leveraging Alawite-dominated security forces and militias such as the Shabiha to suppress Sunni opposition and maintain the regime's dominance (Van Dam, 2011; Lesch, 2012). These variations highlight the adaptability of purges to distinct structural and societal conditions while reinforcing their shared logic as tools of authoritarian governance.

Theoretically, this study builds on Wintrobe's (1998) concept of the "fear equilibrium" and Tilly's (2003: 35) theory of institutionalized violence which is defined as a recurrent, organized application of coercion by established political actors within recognized rules or practices. Wintrobe's framework explains how authoritarian leaders cultivate paranoia and uncertainty to deter dissent and enforce elite compliance, while Tilly's theory emphasizes the evolution of purges from reactive acts of repression to routinized practices embedded in state governance. By applying these frameworks to Stalin's, Saddam's, and Assad's regimes, this study situates purges within broader discussions of authoritarian resilience, illustrating how they operate as durable mechanisms of control.

Through a comparative lens, this study illuminates both the shared foundations of purges and their contextual variations, reflecting each regime's vulnerabilities, ideological imperatives, and societal dynamics. It not only enriches the understanding of political purges but also sheds light on their broader implications for authoritarian governance, elite dynamics, and state violence, providing a foundation for future research into the adaptability of authoritarian strategies across historical and contemporary contexts.

Research Questions and Objectives

This paper is guided by two central questions. First, how do ideological, structural, and personalist factors influence the implementation and evolution of purges in authoritarian regimes? Second, what does a comparative analysis of Stalin's Soviet Union, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and the Assad regime reveal about the adaptability of purges across differing political, cultural, and societal contexts?

To address these questions, this study builds on two theoretical frameworks. Wintrobe's (1998) concept of the "fear equilibrium" explains how authoritarian leaders use purges to maintain loyalty and suppress dissent among elites by cultivating an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. Tilly's (2003) theory of institutionalized violence captures the transition of purges from reactive repression to systemic governance tools, emphasizing their routinization as mechanisms embedded within state structures. Together, these frameworks provide a lens for understanding the dual role of purges as tactical responses to immediate threats and systemic practices for consolidating authoritarian rule.

Structure of the Study

The paper is organized as follows. The next section provides a comprehensive literature review, situating this study within existing scholarship on political purges and identifying gaps in comparative analyses. This is followed

by a methodological section that outlines the rationale for case selection, emphasizing the diversity of Stalin's Soviet Union, Saddam's Iraq, and the Assad regime in Syria, and the comparative framework adopted for this analysis.

The theoretical section introduces the concepts of Wintrobe's "fear equilibrium" and Tilly's institutionalized violence, establishing the basis for understanding the evolution of purges as both reactive and systemic practices. The core analytical section examines the ideological, structural, and personalist dimensions of purges across the three regimes, highlighting shared patterns such as the dual-phase progression from external suppression to internal elite management. The final section discusses the broader implications of these findings for the study of authoritarian governance and proposes directions for future research.

Significance and Contribution

This study makes three key contributions to the literature on authoritarianism and political violence. First, it bridges a critical gap in the scholarship by offering a comparative analysis of purges across ideologically distinct regimes. By situating Stalin's, Saddam's, and Assad's purges within a unified analytical framework, this paper reveals both the universal logic of purges and their contextual adaptability to regime-specific vulnerabilities.

Second, the study advances the theoretical understanding of systemic violence. By integrating Wintrobe's (1998) emphasis on fear as a tool for elite compliance and Tilly's (2003) analysis of institutionalized violence, it demonstrates how purges evolve from ad hoc repression into embedded mechanisms of governance. This synthesis highlights the adaptability of purges to different ideological, structural, and societal conditions.

Third, this research underscores the broader implications of purges as tools for managing elite dynamics, signaling dominance, and maintaining regime stability. By reframing purges as both tactical and systemic practices, the study provides a framework for analyzing political violence in other historical and contemporary authoritarian contexts, such as Pinochet's Chile, Maoist China, or North Korea.

By focusing on the interplay of ideology, structural dynamics, and leadership paranoia, this study seeks to deepen the understanding of how authoritarian regimes sustain power through adaptable and institutionalized practices of violence.

Literature Review

Ideological Framing of Purges

Purges across Stalin's Soviet Union, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and the Assad regime were ideologically framed as essential to regime survival and state transformation. Stalin's purges, rooted in Marxist-Leninist principles, portrayed "class enemies," such as kulaks resisting collectivization, and "counterrevolutionaries," such as Trotskyists, as existential threats to socialism. Public show trials and forced confessions reinforced this narrative,

casting mass arrests and executions as revolutionary justice (Khlevniuk, 2015; Conquest, 2008).

Similarly, Saddam Hussein employed Ba'athist Arab nationalism to justify his purges. Early purges targeted communists, Kurdish leaders, and Shi'a clerics, with violence framed as necessary for preserving Iraq's Arab unity and Ba'athist ideology (Sassoon, 2012). Rasheed (2017) underscores how Saddam's purges, particularly during the Al-Anfal campaign, reflected both ideological and sectarian goals, consolidating Sunni dominance under the guise of suppressing separatism and safeguarding sovereignty.

The Assad regime blended Ba'athist rhetoric with sectarian narratives to legitimize purges. Hafez al-Assad framed the 1982 Hama massacre as a decisive response to Sunni Islamist threats, using violence to cement Alawite dominance in a Sunni-majority society (Van Dam, 2011). The regime's portrayal of the massacre as a necessary defense of national unity masked the collective punishment of an entire city and institutionalized sectarian fear as a tool of governance. Through the systematic destruction of Hama and the silencing of dissent, Hafez al-Assad transformed state violence into a performative act of regime survival, signaling that challenges to the Ba'athist order would be met with annihilation rather than negotiation (Seale, 1988; Hinnebusch, 2001).

Bashar al-Assad continued this strategy during the Syrian Civil War, adapting his father's doctrine of coercion to new political and international contexts. His government framed widespread purges and military campaigns as counterterrorism operations aimed at protecting the secular state, even as they disproportionately targeted Sunni-majority opposition areas and suspected defectors within the armed forces and intelligence institutions (Dagher, 2019; Rasheed, 2017). By invoking both anti-terrorism rhetoric and minority protection, Bashar reproduced the narrative of existential struggle that justified his father's earlier repression, effectively linking regime continuity to sectarian survival. This continuity demonstrates how institutionalized violence, rooted in Hafez's legacy, evolved into a systemic feature of Assadist rule, where coercion became the principal mechanism for maintaining political order and reinforcing the state's sectarian hierarchy.

Structural Adaptations

The implementation of purges reflected the structural vulnerabilities of each regime. Stalin's centralized state apparatus, particularly the NKVD, conducted mass arrests, forced confessions, and public executions, embedding violence into Soviet institutions (Getty, 1987). These actions transformed purges into predictable governance practices, regulating elite behavior while eliminating dissent.

In contrast, Saddam Hussein adapted purges to Iraq's fragmented tribal and sectarian landscape. As Rasheed (2017) notes, Saddam relied on tribal patronage and kin-based loyalty to enforce obedience, personalizing violence to eliminate disloyalty even within his inner circle. The

1979 televised purge, captured in state footage later archived and publicized (Penguin History, 2024), remains one of the most infamous spectacles of authoritarian consolidation in the Middle East. In the video, Saddam convenes a Ba'ath Party Congress shortly after assuming the presidency and publicly accuses 68 senior party members of treason—charges later proven fabricated. One by one, he reads the names of supposed conspirators before a hall of shocked delegates; the accused are dragged away by security officers while the rest are coerced into applauding and pledging allegiance. The purge was broadcast across Iraq, transforming political repression into public theater, demonstrating that Saddam's power was absolute and that survival within his regime depended on performative loyalty. This dramatized act of internal violence not only instilled fear within the Ba'ath elite but also reinforced Saddam's image as the sole guardian of national unity. Similarly, the Al-Anfal campaign (1988) extended this model to Iraq's broader social order, merging Ba'athist ideology, tribal hierarchy, and sectarian coercion to consolidate Sunni Arab dominance through both ideological and institutional mechanisms (Sassoon, 2012; Makiya, 1998).

The Assad regime institutionalized purges through sectarian militias like the Shabiha, using them to suppress dissent and enforce Alawite hegemony (Daher, 2020). Hafez al-Assad's early purges targeted Sunni elites within the military, while Bashar escalated purges during the Syrian Civil War to centralize power and deter defection (Dagher, 2019; Rasheed, 2017). These actions reflect the adaptability of purges to fragmented societal contexts, demonstrating their utility in consolidating control within divided states.

Personal Paranoia and Fear

The role of personal paranoia in driving purges is evident across all three regimes, aligning with Wintrobe's (1998) concept of the "fear equilibrium." In Stalin's Soviet Union, paranoia magnified the scale of purges, with even loyal collaborators like NKVD chief Nikolai Yezhov becoming targets. This unpredictable environment deterred dissent and fostered loyalty through fear (Khlevniuk, 2015).

Saddam Hussein's paranoia similarly extended to close allies and family members. The execution of his sons-in-law, Hussein and Saddam Kamel, after their defection and return to Iraq exemplifies this dynamic in 1996 (Congressional Record, 1998). Rasheed (2017) emphasizes that such acts not only eliminated perceived threats but also sent a clear message of dominance to Iraq's political elite, reinforcing compliance through fear.

In the Assad regime, personal paranoia played a central role under both Hafez and Bashar. Hafez's purges of Ba'ath Party rivals and Sunni officers reflected his distrust of potential challengers (Van Dam, 2011). Bashar mirrored this behavior during the Syrian Civil War, targeting suspected defectors to consolidate power amid chaos. These purges institutionalized fear, ensuring loyalty while deterring dissent (Dagher, 2019; Rasheed, 2017).

Comparative Patterns

This interwoven approach highlights how ideological narratives, structural adaptations, and personal paranoia shaped purges in Stalin's Soviet Union, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and the Assad regime. While the mechanisms varied, the universal logic of purges as tools of authoritarian governance—managing elite dynamics, enforcing loyalty, and suppressing dissent—is evident across all three cases. This discussion demonstrates the adaptability of purges to differing political, cultural, and structural contexts, reinforcing their role as systemic mechanisms of authoritarian control.

Comparative Framework

This study employs a comparative framework to explore the shared logics and contextual variations in the purges conducted under Stalin's Soviet Union, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and the Assad regime in Syria. Drawing on Wintrobe's (1998) concept of the "fear equilibrium" and Tilly's (2003) theory of institutionalized violence, the framework examines how purges evolve from reactive acts of repression into systemic mechanisms of governance. The analysis focuses on three dimensions central to understanding the role of purges in authoritarian regimes: ideological justifications, structural mechanisms, and leadership paranoia.

Despite ideological and structural differences, all three regimes exhibit a shared logic: purges were employed to eliminate internal and external threats, enforce elite compliance, and institutionalize violence as a durable feature of state control. This adaptability underscores the dual function of purges as both tactical responses to immediate threats and systemic tools for long-term authoritarian consolidation.

Key Dimensions of Comparative Analysis

Ideological Justifications

Across all three regimes, ideology provided the primary justification for purges, framing violence as essential for regime survival and state transformation.

In Stalin's Soviet Union, purges were rooted in Marxist-Leninist principles, portraying kulaks resisting collectivization and Communist Party rivals as existential threats to the proletarian dictatorship. This ideological narrative cast purges as acts of revolutionary justice, embedding them into the state's moral and political fabric. High-profile show trials, such as those of Grigory Zinoviev and Nikolai Bukharin, reinforced this ideological framing, presenting repression as necessary for advancing socialism (Khlevniuk, 2015; Conquest, 2008). Stalin extended this justification to ethnic minorities, using deportations of groups like the Chechens and Crimean Tatars to enforce Soviet unity and eliminate perceived sources of resistance (Applebaum, 2017; Martin, 2001).

In Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Ba'athist Arab nationalism framed purges as necessary for preserving national unity and eliminating perceived enemies. The Al-Anfal genocide (1986–1989) targeted Kurdish civilians and Shiites under the pretense of combating separatism and defending Iraq's sovereignty, aligning with Ba'athist

rhetoric while consolidating Sunni dominance (Kurmanj, 2013; Hiltermann, 2007). This ideological alignment masked Saddam's personalist and sectarian motivations, embedding repression within Iraq's political narrative (Sassoon, 2012; Makiya, 1998).

The Assad regime combined Ba'athist rhetoric with sectarian narratives, justifying purges as counterterrorism measures. Hafez al-Assad framed the 1982 Hama massacre as a necessary response to Sunni Islamist threats, using mass violence to secure Alawite dominance in a Sunni-majority society (Gelvin, 2011; Seale, 1989). Bashar al-Assad expanded this strategy during the Syrian Civil War, portraying the targeting of military defectors and Sunni opposition groups as essential for national security (Dagher, 2019; Daher, 2020). These ideological narratives not only legitimized violence but institutionalized it as a mechanism for governance.

Structural Mechanisms

The structural implementation of purges varied significantly across these regimes, reflecting differences in organizational capacities and societal contexts.

Stalin's Soviet Union relied on a centralized bureaucratic apparatus, with the NKVD executing mass arrests, forced confessions, and public trials. This highly systematic approach allowed Stalin to target political elites, ethnic minorities, and broader societal groups like the kulaks on a scale unmatched by Saddam or Assad (Getty & Naumov, 1999). Show trials like those of Bukharin and Zinoviev were instrumental in framing dissent as treachery, consolidating Stalin's control over the Communist Party (Conquest, 2008). Ethnic deportations extended this structural violence, uprooting millions and embedding repression within Soviet governance (Martin, 2001; Applebaum, 2017).

In Iraq, Saddam Hussein adapted purges to a fragmented societal landscape by leveraging tribal and familial networks. This personalization of violence, as Rasheed (2017) notes, allowed Saddam to maintain elite loyalty while addressing Iraq's sectarian divisions. The televised executions of Ba'ath Party members during the 1979 congress showcased his use of public spectacle to instill fear and eliminate rivals. The Al-Anfal campaign further illustrates Saddam's systemic use of purges, targeting Kurdish civilians with mass killings and chemical weapons to consolidate Sunni dominance and suppress opposition (Sassoon, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 1993).

The Assad regime institutionalized purges through sectarian militias, reflecting Syria's deeply fragmented social structure. Hafez al-Assad used the military apparatus to eliminate Sunni opposition during the Hama massacre, killing tens of thousands to secure his regime. Under Bashar, the use of militias like the Shabiha intensified during the Syrian Civil War, targeting suspected defectors and opposition groups to reinforce Alawite control over key institutions (Dagher, 2019; Daher, 2020). This integration of militias into state-sanctioned violence underscores how Assad adapted purges to Syria's societal cleavages.

Leadership Paranoia

Personal paranoia significantly intensified the scope and brutality of purges in all three regimes, aligning with Wintrobe's (1998) "fear equilibrium" framework, which highlights how authoritarian leaders institutionalize fear to deter dissent and enforce compliance.

In Stalin's Soviet Union (1924–1953), paranoia drove purges even against the regime's most loyal allies, such as NKVD head Nikolai Yezhov and Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky. Earlier, Leon Trotsky (1879–1940)—a key revolutionary leader who served as People's Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs from 1918 to 1925—had been expelled from the Communist Party, exiled in 1929, and ultimately assassinated in Mexico in 1940 on Stalin's orders. Accusations of fabricated conspiracies justified these eliminations, signaling that no one was immune from suspicion. These actions created a pervasive culture of fear, ensuring compliance through self-preservation rather than ideological commitment (Getty & Naumov, 1999; Conquest, 1986). Stalin extended this paranoia-driven repression to ethnic groups, with mass deportations of minorities such as the Crimean Tatars in 1944, justified by allegations of wartime collaboration (Applebaum, 2017).

In Iraq, Saddam Hussein's paranoia similarly led to purges of even close allies and family members. The execution of his sons-in-law, Hussein Kamel and Saddam Kamel, following their defection and return to Iraq, demonstrated that familial ties offered no immunity from suspicion. Saddam's use of public trials and executions further institutionalized fear within elite networks, reinforcing his dominance (Rasheed, 2017; Sassoon, 2012).

Under Bashar al-Assad, paranoia became a defining feature during the Syrian Civil War. Suspected defectors within the military and intelligence apparatus were systematically purged, consolidating loyalty within the Alawite-dominated core of the regime. This paranoia extended beyond institutional actors to civilians, as mass arrests, torture, and executions targeted individuals accused of collaborating with opposition forces (Dagher, 2019; Daher, 2020).

Systemic Evolution of Purges

Over time, purges in all three regimes transitioned from reactive acts of repression to institutionalized mechanisms of governance, reflecting Tilly's (2003) theory of institutionalized violence.

Stalin's purges reshaped the Communist Party into a compliant bureaucracy, eliminating factionalism and reinforcing loyalty through fear. This systemic routinization allowed purges to function as tools for elite management and societal control, embedding repression within the Soviet state's operations (Khlevniuk, 2015; Getty & Naumov, 1999).

Similarly, Saddam Hussein routinized purges to enforce tribal loyalty and address Iraq's sectarian vulnerabilities. The Al-Anfal campaign and elite purges became instruments for stabilizing his regime amidst societal

cleavages, consolidating Sunni dominance (Sassoon, 2012).

The Assad regime institutionalized purges as part of its governance strategy. Hafez used purges to solidify Alawite dominance, while Bashar adapted these practices to the dynamics of civil war, employing sectarian militias and intelligence networks to suppress dissent and enforce control (Dagher, 2019; Daher, 2020). This systemic evolution underscores the adaptability of purges as instruments of authoritarian consolidation across varying political and social contexts.

Theoretical Anchors

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks: Wintrobe's (1998) concept of the "fear equilibrium" and Tilly's (2003) theory of institutionalized violence. These frameworks illuminate the dynamics of purges in authoritarian regimes, showing how they evolve from tactical responses to systemic tools of governance. By linking personalist paranoia with structural mechanisms of violence, this approach captures the dual function of purges: managing elite dynamics and embedding fear as a durable feature of state control. Together, these theories provide a lens through which to analyze the shared patterns and contextual differences in the purges of Stalin's Soviet Union, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and the Assad regime in Syria.

1. Wintrobe's "Fear Equilibrium"

Wintrobe's (1998) theory highlights the role of fear in authoritarian governance, where leaders foster an atmosphere of paranoia and uncertainty to deter dissent and enforce elite compliance. Purges function as public demonstrations of the costs of disloyalty, preempting collective resistance and reinforcing the ruler's dominance.

- **Stalin's Soviet Union:**

- The Great Terror (1936–1938) epitomizes the "fear equilibrium." Stalin targeted ideological rivals like Leon Trotsky and even loyalists such as Nikolai Yezhov, head of the NKVD. These actions institutionalized paranoia within the Communist Party and the military, creating an environment of uncertainty that stifled opposition. By purging high-ranking officials and sowing fear throughout state institutions, Stalin consolidated his personalist rule and restructured the Soviet elite (Getty & Naumov, 1999; Khlevniuk, 2015).

- **Saddam Hussein's Iraq:**

- Saddam's purges also aligned with the "fear equilibrium," tailored to Iraq's tribal and sectarian divisions. The execution of his sons-in-law, Hussein Kamel and Saddam Kamel, following their defection and return, demonstrated Saddam's use of purges to enforce loyalty—even among close family members. Similarly, the 1979 televised purge of Ba'ath Party members highlighted his ability to publicly instill fear, eliminating rivals while ensuring compliance among Iraq's political elite (Makiya, 1998; Sassoon, 2012).

- **The Assad Regime:**

- Paranoia shaped governance under both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad. Hafez's purges of Ba'ath Party rivals, such as Salah Jadid, and the brutal suppression of Sunni Islamist opposition during the 1982 Hama massacre institutionalized fear across Syrian society. Another illustrative case is the 1980 Tadmor Prison massacre, in which regime security forces commanded by Rifaat al-Assad indiscriminately executed hundreds to over a thousand Islamist detainees in retaliation for an assassination attempt on Hafez (Amnesty International 2001). Under Bashar, these coercive practices escalated further: he systematically targeted military defectors and suspected opposition figures during the Syrian Civil War, reinforcing loyalty within the Alawite-dominated elite and deterring dissent (Dagher, 2019; Daher, 2020).

By embedding paranoia into governance, these regimes used purges to create a climate of fear that ensured elite loyalty and suppressed opposition. This strategy highlights the psychological dimensions of purges as instruments of authoritarian resilience.

2. Tilly's Institutionalized Violence

Tilly's (2003) framework focuses on how violence transitions from episodic repression to systemic practices embedded within state institutions. Institutionalized violence becomes a routinized mechanism for managing elite behavior, aligning repression with broader regime goals.

- **Stalin's Soviet Union:**

- The NKVD exemplified the institutionalization of violence under Stalin. Purges targeting kulaks, political rivals, and ethnic minorities were framed as necessary for revolutionary transformation and achieving socialism. Systematic deportations and high-profile show trials, such as those of Bukharin and Zinoviev, demonstrated how Stalin used violence to embed repression within state operations, creating a scalable model for governing through fear (Conquest, 2008; Getty, 1987).

- **Saddam Hussein's Iraq:**

- Institutionalized violence in Saddam's Iraq blended tribal networks with state apparatuses. Campaigns like Al-Anfal targeted Kurdish civilians under the guise of countering separatism, embedding repression within Iraq's political and social fabric. These purges also reinforced Sunni Arab dominance, using demographic engineering to marginalize Kurdish and Shi'a communities while consolidating regime control (Sassoon, 2012; Rasheed, 2017).

- **The Assad Regime:**

- Under Hafez and Bashar al-Assad, sectarian militias like the Shabiha institutionalized violence. The 1982 Hama massacre and the systematic targeting of Sunni opposition during the Syrian Civil War demonstrated how the regime embedded repression into its governance framework. By aligning violence with counterterrorism rhetoric, the Assad regime transformed sectarian repression into a durable feature of state control (Dagher, 2019; Daher, 2020).

Tilly's framework reveals how purges transition from ad hoc measures to institutionalized tools of governance, aligning state structures with the regime's objectives.

3. Integrating Wintrobe and Tilly: Complementary Insights

The combination of Wintrobe's psychological perspective and Tilly's structural approach offers a comprehensive understanding of purges. Wintrobe emphasizes how paranoia drives leaders to initiate purges, while Tilly explains how these actions become embedded within governance. For example, Stalin's paranoia catalyzed the creation and empowerment of the NKVD, which between 1936 and 1938 orchestrated the Great Purge—a systematic campaign of arrests, executions, and forced confessions that institutionalized fear across the Soviet Union. Under Nikolai Yezhov's leadership, the NKVD targeted Communist Party elites, military officers, and ordinary citizens, transforming political suspicion into an instrument of state governance (Getty & Naumov, 1999; Conquest, 1990). Saddam Hussein's reliance on tribal networks similarly embedded repression into Iraq's political fabric, ensuring regime stability despite deep societal fragmentation. In Syria, the Assad regime's deployment of sectarian militias replicated this pattern, institutionalizing fear within the governance framework and blending psychological and structural dimensions of violence to sustain authoritarian control (Dagher, 2019; Daher, 2020).

This integration highlights a feedback loop: paranoia-driven purges create mechanisms for repression, which are then routinized to sustain authoritarian control. These complementary frameworks demonstrate how purges evolve from reactive strategies into systemic governance tools, tailored to the vulnerabilities and goals of authoritarian regimes.

Comparative Analysis: Purges in Stalin's Soviet Union, Saddam's Iraq, and Assad's Syria:

The purges conducted under Joseph Stalin, Saddam Hussein, and the al-Assad regime illustrate their enduring relevance as tools of authoritarian control. Despite significant differences in their ideological foundations, organizational structures, and societal contexts, all three regimes used purges to consolidate power, eliminate opposition, and institutionalize repression. Each regime tailored purges to address specific vulnerabilities, demonstrating the adaptability of these mechanisms across diverse political and historical settings.

Purges in these regimes evolved from reactive responses to immediate threats into systemic instruments of governance, designed to manage elite dynamics, suppress dissent, and restructure society in alignment with the leader's vision. Through the dual lenses of Wintrobe's (1998) "fear equilibrium" and Tilly's (2003) theory of institutionalized violence, purges can be understood not only as acts of repression but as enduring practices embedded within authoritarian rule. This section employs these frameworks to analyze three shared dimensions of purges across the cases: their dual-phase progression, ideological framing, and the role of personal paranoia.

While these shared characteristics reveal common strategies of authoritarian control, the execution and targets of purges in Stalin's Soviet Union, Saddam's Iraq, and Assad's Syria were shaped by distinct historical and societal contexts. Stalin's purges were deeply intertwined with Marxist-Leninist principles and the Soviet Union's centralized bureaucratic state, targeting class enemies and political rivals within a rigid ideological framework. Saddam's purges leveraged Iraq's tribal and sectarian divisions, blending Ba'athist nationalism with ethnic repression to consolidate Sunni dominance. Meanwhile, the Assad regimes employed purges to sustain Alawite dominance in a Sunni-majority society, invoking Ba'athist and sectarian narratives to legitimize violence.

By examining the shared characteristics and divergent contexts of purges across these three regimes, this analysis highlights the universal adaptability of purges as tools of authoritarian governance. The study underscores how authoritarian leaders exploit societal cleavages, manipulate ideological narratives, and institutionalize fear to maintain their grip on power.

Table 1: Shared Characteristics of Purges in Stalin's Soviet Union, Saddam's Iraq, and Assad's Syria

Dimension	Description	Stalin (Soviet Union)	Saddam (Iraq)	Assad (Syria)
Dual Phases	Initial focus on external threats, later on internal consolidation	Early purges targeted kulaks and remnants of the Tsarist regime; later purges targeted Bolshevik elites during the Great Terror.	Early focus on communists and nationalists; shifted to internal Ba'ath Party rivals by 1979.	Early purges targeted military figures and politicians, then Sunni Islamists (e.g., Hama massacre); later targeted military defectors during the Syrian Civil War.
Ideological Framing	Justification of violence through ideological narratives	Framed violence as class struggle to eliminate "counter-revolutionaries" and achieve socialism.	Framed purges as essential for defending Arab unity and countering Zionist conspiracies.	Framed purges as necessary for counterterrorism and state unity against "foreign agents."

Paranoia	Institutionalization of fear to enforce loyalty and suppress dissent	Execution of loyal figures like NKVD head Yezhov to sustain elite fear and compliance.	Execution of sons-in-law after defection exemplified Saddam's paranoia-driven purges.	Targeting of military officers and intelligence operatives suspected of disloyalty during the Civil War.

Across the regimes of Joseph Stalin, Saddam Hussein, and the Assad family in Syria, purges followed a dual-phase progression: initially targeting external adversaries before focusing on internal rivals as each regime consolidated power. This strategic use of violence not only eliminated immediate opposition but also enforced loyalty and secured authoritarian rule.

Stalin's Soviet Union

In the early 1930s, Stalin's purges focused on external threats, particularly the kulaks, relatively affluent peasants resisting collectivization. These individuals were labeled "class enemies," and Stalin justified their elimination as essential for achieving socialist goals and state control over agriculture. The infamous "Dekulakization" campaigns displaced millions, resulting in widespread famine, particularly in Ukraine during the Holodomor (Applebaum, 2017). These actions aligned with Marxist-Leninist goals, eliminating perceived economic sabotage while centralizing agricultural control.

By the mid-1930s, Stalin redirected purges inward, initiating the Great Terror (1936–1938). Communist Party elites, military officers, and intellectuals faced accusations of treason, often in public show trials. High-profile victims like Leon Trotsky, Grigory Zinoviev, and Nikolai Bukharin were executed, consolidating Stalin's unchallenged authority and transforming the Communist Party into a compliant extension of his personalist rule (Getty & Naumov, 1999). The Great Terror institutionalized fear, ensuring compliance and solidifying Stalin's totalitarian governance.

Saddam Hussein's Iraq (1979-2003)

In Saddam Hussein's Iraq, early purges targeted external enemies, including communists and pan-Arab nationalists who opposed Ba'athist ideology. These actions were framed as essential for consolidating the revolutionary trajectory of the Ba'ath Party (Aburish, 2000). Saddam, serving as the party's enforcer, used violence to suppress opposition and bolster Ba'athist dominance.

After assuming the presidency in 1979, Saddam turned his focus inward. The infamous 1979 televised Ba'ath Party Purge accused high-ranking officials of treason, culminating in public executions that eliminated potential rivals while intimidating Iraq's elite (Sassoon, 2012). The Al-Anfal campaign (1986–1989) marked the extension of purges into systemic governance, targeting Kurdish civilians with mass killings and chemical weapons. Framed as countering separatism, these actions reinforced Sunni dominance while institutionalizing violence within Iraq's tribal and sectarian structures (Human Rights Watch, 1993).

The Assad Regime in Syria

Under Hafez al-Assad, purges initially targeted rivals within the Ba'ath Party, consolidating power through actions like the removal of Salah Jadid. The 1982 Hama massacre epitomized the regime's systemic use of violence, with tens of thousands killed to suppress a Sunni Islamist uprising (Seale, 1989). These actions institutionalized repression within Alawite-dominated networks, embedding fear and ensuring compliance.

Bashar al-Assad extended these practices during the Syrian Civil War, targeting suspected defectors and opposition figures. Sectarian militias, such as the Shabiha, played a key role in purges, which were framed as counterterrorism measures to justify violence against Sunni opposition groups (Dagher, 2019; Daher, 2020). This integration of sectarian violence into state governance highlights the Assad regime's adaptation of purges to Syria's fragmented societal structure.

Ideological Framing

Ideology played a crucial role in legitimizing purges across Stalin's Soviet Union, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and the Assad regime. Despite their differing foundations—ranging from Marxist-Leninist class struggle to Ba'athist Arab nationalism and sectarian narratives—all three regimes framed violence as a moral and political necessity. By embedding repression within ideological frameworks, these leaders transformed purges into systemic governance tools that aligned state violence with broader regime objectives.

Stalin's Soviet Union

In Stalin's Soviet Union, purges were justified as essential for safeguarding socialism and advancing revolutionary progress. Marxist-Leninist ideology cast "class enemies," such as kulaks resisting collectivization, and "counterrevolutionaries," such as Trotskyists—followers of Leon Trotsky, who advocated permanent international revolution and opposed Stalin's doctrine of "socialism in one country"—and remnants of the Tsarist elite, meaning former nobles, military officers, and bureaucrats of the pre-revolutionary Russian Empire suspected of harboring monarchist or anti-Bolshevik sentiments—as existential threats to the proletarian dictatorship. This narrative framed the elimination of these groups as a moral imperative to protect the Soviet state and achieve its industrial and agricultural goals. Public show trials, such as those of Grigory Zinoviev and Nikolai Bukharin, reinforced this narrative by presenting purges as acts of justice rather than repression (Khlevniuk, 2015; Getty & Naumov, 1999).

These ideological justifications extended to Stalin's efforts to reshape society, using purges as a tool for revolutionary transformation. Campaigns like Dekulakization targeted millions, forcibly displacing or executing individuals labeled as enemies of socialism. This alignment of violence with ideology institutionalized purges as a recurring feature of Soviet governance, embedding fear into the political system while consolidating Stalin's personalist rule. This strategic alignment exemplifies Tilly's (2003) theory of institutionalized violence, wherein state repression transitions from reactive measures to embedded governance practices.

Saddam Hussein's Iraq

In Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Ba'athist Arab nationalism served as the ideological foundation for purges. Ba'athist rhetoric emphasized Arab unity, positioning Iraq as a vanguard against Zionism, imperialism, and internal dissent. This narrative justified campaigns like Al-Anfal (1986–1989), which targeted Kurdish civilians under the guise of countering separatist threats and preserving Iraq's sovereignty (Kurmanj, 2013). Saddam framed these actions as essential for defending Arab nationalism while masking their underlying ethno-sectarian motivations aimed at consolidating Sunni Arab dominance.

The use of Ba'athist ideology extended to internal political purges, such as the televised executions during the 1979 Ba'ath Party congress. These purges were portrayed as acts of patriotism, reinforcing Saddam's image as a defender of Iraq's revolutionary path. By invoking ideological justifications, Saddam reframed violence as a governance tool to suppress opposition and manage Iraq's societal divisions (Sassoon, 2012; Aburish, 2000). This alignment with Tilly's framework highlights how ideology was weaponized to transform purges into routinized practices for consolidating power and suppressing dissent.

The Assad Regime in Syria

The Assad regimes combined Ba'athist rhetoric with sectarian narratives to legitimize violence. Under Hafez al-Assad, the infamous 1982 Hama massacre was framed as a decisive response to treasonous Sunni Islamist groups, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood—a transnational Islamist movement founded in Egypt in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna, which sought to build a society governed by Islamic law and moral principles through political and social activism. In the Syrian context, the Brotherhood had become the main opposition force to Ba'athist secular rule, attracting support from segments of the Sunni urban middle class and clerical networks. The Assad regime portrayed the movement as an existential threat to national unity and state stability, enabling it to justify mass violence while reinforcing Alawite dominance in a Sunni-majority society (Seale, 1989; Van Dam, 2011).

Bashar al-Assad expanded these ideological justifications during the Syrian Civil War. Counterterrorism rhetoric became a central narrative, portraying opposition forces as foreign-backed extremists intent on destabilizing Syria. This framing not only justified external repression but also legitimized internal purges targeting suspected defectors within the military and intelligence apparatus. The reliance on sectarian militias like the Shabiha exemplified how the Assad regime institutionalized violence as a central feature of governance (Dagher, 2019; Daher, 2020).

By embedding violence into the moral fabric of governance, both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad institutionalized purges as a means of maintaining Alawite dominance. This strategy reflects Tilly's theory of systemic violence, demonstrating how authoritarian leaders adapt ideological narratives to justify repression while embedding it within state institutions.

The Role of Personal Paranoia

Paranoia was a defining force behind the purges conducted in Stalin's Soviet Union, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and the Assad regime in Syria. Wintrobe's (1998) concept of the "fear equilibrium" aptly captures this dynamic, illustrating how authoritarian leaders use suspicion and uncertainty as instruments to deter dissent, enforce loyalty, and consolidate their grip on power. Across these regimes, paranoia not only influenced the scale and intensity of purges but also institutionalized fear as a core governance strategy.

Stalin's Soviet Union

Paranoia was central to the Great Terror (1936–1938), as Stalin's suspicion extended even to his most trusted associates. High-ranking officials, such as Nikolai Yezhov, head of the NKVD, and Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, were accused of fabricated conspiracies and executed. Stalin's distrust of the military, which he perceived as a potential breeding ground for dissent, led to the decimation of its leadership during a series of purges. These actions weakened the independence of the Red Army, consolidating Stalin's personal control over the military and state apparatus (Getty & Naumov, 1999; Conquest, 1986).

The purges also targeted political elites and ethnic minorities, creating an environment of pervasive fear where no one, regardless of their allegiance, felt safe from reprisal. Wintrobe's (1998) concept of the "fear equilibrium" is exemplified here, as Stalin's unpredictability ensured that compliance was motivated by self-preservation rather than ideological conviction. This feedback loop institutionalized paranoia, embedding it into the governance of the Soviet Union and transforming purges into a predictable yet terrifying feature of Stalinist rule.

Saddam Hussein's Iraq

In Saddam Hussein's Iraq, paranoia permeated governance through both familial betrayal and institutionalized repression. A striking example is the execution of Saddam's sons-in-law, Hussein Kamel and Saddam Kamel, after their defection to Jordan and subsequent return in 1996. Despite their close kinship and former positions within the regime, Saddam viewed their actions as an existential threat and ordered their deaths to reassert dominance. This act sent a chilling message to Iraq's political and tribal elite that loyalty was conditional and

reversible, reinforcing a climate of fear and submission (Coughlin, 2005; Sassoon, 2012).

Saddam also used tribal patronage and collective punishment to manage dissent. Following the 1991 Shi'a and Kurdish uprisings, the regime launched brutal counterinsurgency campaigns marked by mass executions, forced displacement, and chemical attacks, particularly during the Anfal campaign (1988). These operations blurred the line between internal security and ethnic cleansing, embedding coercion within Iraq's political fabric. By rewarding loyal tribes while violently suppressing marginalized communities, Saddam converted Iraq's social fragmentation into a tool of regime durability.

This governance pattern illustrates Wintrobe's (1998) "fear equilibrium", in which unpredictability and repression maintain elite loyalty and civilian obedience. Through a deliberate mix of personalized violence, tribal co-optation, and selective brutality, Saddam institutionalized paranoia as a governing strategy, ensuring that power flowed through fear rather than trust (Makiya, 1998; Sassoon, 2012).

The Assad Regime in Syria

In the Assad regime, paranoia similarly shaped governance under both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad. Hafez al-Assad's early purges within the Ba'ath Party were driven by distrust of potential rivals, leading to the elimination of figures such as Salah Jadid. The 1982 Hama massacre highlighted the extent of Hafez's paranoia, as the regime used overwhelming violence to crush Sunni Islamist opposition, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood. This massacre not only suppressed immediate dissent but also institutionalized fear as a long-term deterrent (Seale, 1989; Van Dam, 2011).

Under Bashar al-Assad, paranoia intensified during the Syrian Civil War. The regime conducted systematic purges of military officers, intelligence operatives, and political elites suspected of disloyalty, consolidating control within Alawite-dominated networks. This reliance on sectarian support reflected Bashar's use of fear to enforce loyalty amid widespread instability. Beyond institutional actors, paranoia extended to civilians accused of collaborating with opposition forces, resulting in mass arrests, torture, and executions (Dagher, 2019; Daher, 2020). By embedding paranoia into its governance strategy, the Assad regime mirrored the cycles of repression seen in Stalin's and Saddam's systems, ensuring regime survival through fear and violence.

Divergent Contexts and Mechanisms of Purges

While Stalin, Saddam, and Assad all employed purges as a means of consolidating their regimes, their approaches were shaped by distinct ideological, organizational, and societal contexts. These differences underscore the adaptability of systemic violence, aligning with Tilly's (2003) theory of institutionalized violence, and illustrate how authoritarian leaders tailored purges to exploit unique vulnerabilities and enforce compliance. Despite these variations, all three regimes institutionalized purges as tools for control, embedding paranoia and repression into

governance structures consistent with Wintrobe's (1998) "fear equilibrium."

Societal Cleavages and Purge Targets

The societal divisions targeted by Stalin, Saddam, and Assad reflected each regime's ideological and structural foundations. In Stalin's Soviet Union, purges were rooted in Marxist-Leninist class struggle, focusing on groups deemed obstacles to revolutionary progress. Targets included kulaks resisting collectivization, bourgeois intellectuals opposing industrialization, and "counterrevolutionaries" within the Communist Party. These campaigns eliminated entire social classes, aligning Soviet society with Stalin's vision of socialism and establishing a precedent for class-based repression (Conquest, 2008; Getty & Naumov, 1999).

In Saddam Hussein's Iraq, the logic of purging was less ideological and more instrumental and patrimonial. Saddam exploited Iraq's tribal and sectarian divisions not only to repress minorities but also to structure loyalty within the regime. He elevated trusted Sunni Arab tribes—particularly those from his Tikriti base—into positions of influence in the military and intelligence sectors while marginalizing or rotating Shi'a and Kurdish officers to prevent alternative power centers. Violence against Kurds and Shi'a, including the Anfal campaign and post-1991 uprisings, reflected this broader calculus of control: repression was not merely punitive but also a mechanism for managing Iraq's fragmented political landscape and ensuring elite cohesion through fear and dependency (Sassoon, 2012; Baram, 1991).

The Assad regime in Syria similarly adapted purges to preserve Alawite dominance in a Sunni-majority society. Under Hafez al-Assad, early Ba'athist rivalries and uprisings were suppressed through systematic coercion, culminating in the 1980 Tadmor Prison massacre and the 1982 Hama massacre, which eradicated Islamist opposition and institutionalized fear (Seale, 1989; Amnesty International, 2001). Bashar al-Assad continued this pattern during the Syrian Civil War, using purges within the military and intelligence services to consolidate Alawite loyalty while justifying broader violence as counterterrorism (Dagher, 2019).

Together, these cases demonstrate how purges exploited different societal cleavages: class-based repression in Stalin's USSR, patrimonial-sectarian control in Saddam's Iraq, and sectarian consolidation in Assad's Syria. Each regime instrumentalized existing divisions not only to eliminate threats but also to remake society in ways that sustained authoritarian rule through managed fear.

Internal Party Dynamics and Organizational Structures

The internal dynamics of ruling parties also shaped the execution and institutionalization of purges. Stalin's centralized Bolshevik Party provided the apparatus for eliminating factional rivals, such as Leon Trotsky and Nikolai Bukharin, during the Great Terror. These purges transformed the Communist Party into a compliant and ideologically uniform institution, ensuring loyalty through fear while aligning the party with Stalin's personalist rule (Khlevniuk, 2015; Suny, 1998).

In Saddam's Iraq, the Ba'ath Party's tribal and familial networks intensified the personalization of violence. The 1979 televised executions of alleged conspirators within the Ba'ath Party exemplified how Saddam used public displays of violence to enforce loyalty and deter dissent. This event solidified Saddam's control over the party while instilling fear among Iraq's political elite (Makiya, 1998; Sassoon, 2012). These networks also facilitated campaigns like Al-Anfal, embedding repression within Iraq's fragmented social structure.

The Assad regime similarly relied on identity-based networks. Hafez al-Assad replaced Sunni officers with Alawite loyalists in the military, creating a sectarian power base. Bashar al-Assad extended this strategy by deploying militias such as the Shabiha to suppress opposition during the Syrian Civil War. These sectarian networks institutionalized violence, ensuring the regime's survival while deepening societal cleavages (Phillips, 2015; Daher, 2020). These contrasts reveal how authoritarian leaders adapted party dynamics and organizational structures to implement purges effectively.

Table 2: Divergent Target Groups Across Stalin's Soviet Union, Saddam's Iraq, and Assad's Syria

Target Groups	Stalin's USSR	Saddam's Iraq	Assad's Syria
Political Rivals	High (e.g., Trotsky)	High (e.g., Ba'athists)	High (e.g., defectors)
Ethnic Minorities	High (e.g., Poles)	High (e.g., Kurds)	High (e.g., Sunnis)
Economic Groups	High (e.g., Kulaks)	Low	Low
Inner Circle	High	High	High

Divergent Goals and Mechanisms

The broader objectives of purges further underscore their divergent mechanisms. Stalin's purges were deeply ideological, aligning with campaigns of industrialization and collectivization to enforce revolutionary transformation. These efforts reflected Marxist-Leninist aspirations for societal restructuring, with violence serving as a means to achieve these broader ideological goals (Khlevniuk, 2015; Getty, 1987).

In contrast, Saddam's purges prioritized regime survival and the consolidation of Sunni tribal dominance over Iraq's fragmented population. Campaigns like Al-Anfal lacked the ideological depth of Stalin's purges, focusing instead on demographic control and the elimination of perceived threats to Sunni hegemony (Sassoon, 2012; Aburish, 2000). These actions, while pragmatic, reinforced Saddam's personalist rule and institutionalized violence within Iraq's governance structures.

Similarly, the Assad regime's purges were designed to maintain Alawite dominance rather than achieve broader societal transformation. While invoking rhetoric of state unity or counterterrorism, the purges under Hafez and Bashar primarily served to entrench sectarian control. The use of militias and targeted repression during the Syrian Civil War exemplifies this focus on sustaining power rather than pursuing systemic change (Dagher, 2019; Daher, 2020).

Theoretical Implications and Broader Contributions

This section analyzes the theoretical implications of purges as mechanisms of authoritarian consolidation, drawing on Wintrobe's (1998) concept of the "fear equilibrium" and Tilly's (2003) theory of institutionalized violence. These frameworks provide complementary perspectives on how purges evolve from tactical responses to systemic governance tools. They highlight purges' dual function: managing elite behavior and suppressing societal opposition, while adapting to each regime's ideological and structural contexts.

The cases of Stalin's Soviet Union, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and the Assad regimes in Syria reveal shared patterns in the use of purges despite their contextual differences. Wintrobe's framework emphasizes the centrality of fear and uncertainty in sustaining elite compliance, while Tilly's theory explains how repression transitions into institutionalized practices integral to better governance. Together, these perspectives show how authoritarian leaders manipulate societal vulnerabilities—whether ideological, tribal, or sectarian—to consolidate power and enforce regime stability.

Wintrobe's "Fear Equilibrium"

Wintrobe's (1998) concept of the "fear equilibrium" elucidates how authoritarian leaders cultivate paranoia to deter dissent and enforce loyalty. By making the costs of disloyalty severe and unpredictable, regimes foster a climate where compliance becomes a survival strategy. While the manifestations of fear varied across the three regimes, its role in reinforcing control was consistent.

In Stalin's Soviet Union, fear was institutionalized through state apparatuses such as the NKVD. Public show trials, mass arrests, and executions during the Great Terror (1936–1938) targeted not only ideological rivals but also loyal elites accused of fabricated crimes. These actions created an environment where loyalty stemmed from self-preservation rather than ideological conviction. For example, high-profile purges of figures like Nikolai Yezhov and Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky underscored the pervasiveness of paranoia within the Communist Party and military. These purges aligned violence with Marxist-Leninist principles, presenting repression as a defense of socialism and the proletariat dictatorship, while

embedding fear into the fabric of governance (Fitzpatrick, 1999; Getty & Naumov, 1999).

Saddam Hussein's Iraq personalized the "fear equilibrium," using tribal and familial networks to consolidate power in a fragmented society. The 1979 televised purge of Ba'ath Party members, where senior officials were accused of treason and executed, demonstrated Saddam's dominance and reinforced fear among elites. Similarly, the execution of his sons-in-law, Hussein Kamel and Saddam Kamel, following their defection and return, highlighted the unpredictability of Saddam's governance. These acts institutionalized paranoia within Iraq's elite networks, ensuring loyalty through fear rather than trust (Makiya, 1998; Sassoon, 2012).

In Syria, Hafez and Bashar al-Assad institutionalized fear within sectarian governance structures. Hafez's 1982 Hama massacre, targeting Sunni Islamist groups, illustrated his willingness to deploy mass violence to preempt perceived threats. Bashar expanded this approach during the Syrian Civil War (2011-2024), using counterterrorism rhetoric to justify purges of suspected defectors and Sunni opposition groups. By embedding fear into Alawite-dominated networks, the Assads created a governance strategy where suspicion and repression deterred dissent among both elites and the broader population (Dagher, 2019; Daher, 2020).

These cases validate Wintrobe's assertion that fear is central to authoritarian consolidation. While Stalin institutionalized paranoia through centralized mechanisms, Saddam's personalized approach relied on tribal networks, and the Assads integrated fear into sectarian governance.

Tilly's Institutionalized Violence

Tilly's (2003) theory of institutionalized violence explains how systemic repression evolves from reactive measures to routine governance tools embedded within state structures. The cases of Stalin, Saddam, and Assad illustrate how purges transitioned from episodic acts to sustained practices integral to maintaining control.

In Stalin's Soviet Union, the NKVD transformed purges into bureaucratic operations, conducting systematic arrests, forced confessions, and executions during the Great Terror. These actions targeted political rivals, ethnic minorities, and perceived class enemies, aligning repression with state goals of industrialization and collectivization. Entire social groups, such as kulaks and ethnic Poles, were eradicated to enforce Stalin's revolutionary vision. This institutionalization of violence allowed Stalin to eliminate alternative power bases and consolidate authority, embedding repression within the administrative fabric of the state (Conquest, 2008; Getty, 1987).

Saddam Hussein's regime lacked the centralized bureaucratic machinery of Stalin's USSR but institutionalized violence through tribal networks and Ba'athist structures. Campaigns like Al-Anfal (1986–1989), targeting Kurdish civilians, demonstrated how purges were used for demographic engineering and enforcing Sunni Arab dominance. These purges extended beyond elite management to include mass repression, employing tactics like chemical attacks and forced displacements. Public executions, such as the 1979 televised purge, reinforced fear as a governance strategy, embedding violence within the state apparatus (Sassoon, 2012; Kirmanc, 2013).

The Assad regime institutionalized violence through sectarian militias and the Ba'ath Party. Under Hafez, purges targeted Sunni opposition, as exemplified by the Hama massacre, which eliminated significant threats to Alawite dominance. Bashar al-Assad expanded these practices during the Syrian Civil War by deploying loyalist militias like the Shabiha. These militias blurred the lines between state power and sectarian violence, conducting mass arrests, extrajudicial killings, and purges of suspected opposition figures (Phillips, 2015; Daher, 2020). The institutionalization of such violence embedded repression into the regime's operational framework, reinforcing Assad's control amidst societal fragmentation. These cases underscore Tilly's argument that systemic violence becomes a durable feature of governance. Stalin's centralized purges reflected bureaucratic precision, Saddam's purges adapted to tribal dynamics, and the Assads' purges aligned with sectarian priorities.

Table 3: Theoretical Integration of Purges in Stalin's Soviet Union, Saddam's Iraq, and Assad's Syria

Theory	Validation/Challenge	Key Findings
Wintrobe's "Fear Equilibrium"	Validated: Fear and uncertainty deterred dissent and reinforced elite loyalty	Institutionalized fear ensured compliance in all three regimes.
Tilly's Institutionalized Violence	Validated: Purges transitioned from reactive repression to systemic governance tools	Violence became routinized, reflecting systemic governance strategies.
Adaptability of Strategies	Validated: Purges adapted to ideological, structural, and societal contexts	Stalin's purges aligned with ideology, Saddam's with tribalism, Assad's with sectarianism.

Adaptability of Purges

The adaptability of purges in Stalin's Soviet Union, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and Assad's Syria highlights their dual role as tactical responses to threats and systemic mechanisms of authoritarian consolidation. While the ideological, structural, and societal contexts differed significantly across these regimes, purges were tailored to exploit vulnerabilities, enforce loyalty, and institutionalize control. These variations validate Wintrobe's (1998) "fear equilibrium" and Tilly's (2003) theory of institutionalized

violence, demonstrating the universality of purges as governance tools while emphasizing their contextual flexibility.

In Stalin's Soviet Union, purges were rooted in Marxist-Leninist ideology, portraying violence as essential for eliminating "class enemies" and achieving revolutionary transformation. Stalin's campaigns targeted kulaks, political rivals, and perceived dissenters, systematically aligning repression with state goals like collectivization and industrialization. These actions framed mass repression as a moral imperative, embedding purges into Soviet governance (Khlevniuk, 2015).

Saddam Hussein's purges prioritized ethno-sectarian dominance over ideological coherence. Campaigns such as Al-Anfal targeted Kurdish civilians and Shiites under the guise of combating separatism while consolidating Sunni Arab control in Iraq's fragmented society. While Ba'athist rhetoric invoked themes of Arab unity, Saddam's purges were pragmatic, using tribal networks and public spectacles, such as the 1979 televised executions, to deter dissent and reinforce loyalty (Sassoon, 2012; Makiya, 1998).

The Assad regime used purges to sustain Alawite dominance in a Sunni-majority society. Hafez al-Assad's elimination of Ba'athist rivals and the 1982 Hama massacre exemplified this approach, framing repression as necessary for state stability. Bashar al-Assad expanded these practices during the Syrian Civil War, employing sectarian militias to suppress dissent and centralize power. These purges exploited Syria's societal cleavages, embedding violence into governance to maintain Alawite hegemony (Seale, 1989; Dagher, 2019).

IX. Comparative Analysis: Flexibility and Contextual Adaptation

The adaptability of purges demonstrates their dual role as instruments of elite management and societal control. While the overarching goal of eliminating threats and consolidating power remains consistent, their execution reflects distinct ideological, structural, and societal contexts. These cases validate Wintrobe's assertion that fear underpins elite compliance and Tilly's theory that systemic violence evolves into embedded governance practices.

Structural Adaptation

Structural differences shaped the mechanisms of purges in each regime. Stalin's Soviet Union relied on a centralized bureaucracy, exemplified by the NKVD, to target political elites, ethnic minorities, and social groups like kulaks. The NKVD's administrative reach ensured systematic repression aligned with state objectives (Getty, 1987). Saddam Hussein's Iraq, by contrast, utilized tribal and familial networks, reflecting the fragmented nature of Iraqi society. Purges like the 1979 televised executions of Ba'athists showcased Saddam's ability to enforce loyalty through public displays of brutality (Makiya, 1998). The Assad regime leveraged sectarian militias, such as the Shabiha, to suppress Sunni opposition during the Syrian Civil War, adapting repression to Syria's fragmented societal landscape (Phillips, 2015; Daher, 2020).

Ideological Flexibility

Ideological narratives justified violence across all three regimes. Stalin's purges, rooted in Marxist-Leninist principles, framed repression as a moral necessity for achieving socialism, using show trials and propaganda to align purges with state objectives (Khlevniuk, 2015). Saddam Hussein invoked Ba'athist Arab nationalism to legitimize campaigns like Al-Anfal, emphasizing Iraqi sovereignty while masking sectarian objectives (Sassoon, 2012). The Assad regimes combined Ba'athist rhetoric with sectarian narratives, framing purges as counterterrorism measures to defend Syrian unity, particularly during the 1982 Hama massacre and the Syrian Civil War (Dagher, 2019).

Elite Restructuring

Purges across these regimes also restructured elite networks, eliminating rivals and reinforcing personalist control. Stalin's purges dismantled alternative power bases within the Communist Party and military, targeting figures like Trotsky and Bukharin to secure his authority (Conquest, 2008). Saddam Hussein similarly purged Ba'athist rivals, including family members like Hussein Kamel, to consolidate power and instill fear among Iraq's elite (Karsh & Rautsi, 1991). The Assad regime replaced Sunni officers with Alawite loyalists, ensuring sectarian alignment in military and intelligence leadership while suppressing suspected defectors during the Syrian Civil War (Phillips, 2015; Daher, 2020).

Conclusion

The adaptability of purges underscores their dual function as tactical responses to threats and systemic mechanisms of authoritarian consolidation. Structural differences influenced their implementation: Stalin's centralized apparatus contrasted with Saddam's reliance on tribal networks and Assad's use of sectarian militias. Ideological narratives legitimized these acts of repression, aligning violence with the political and societal contexts of each regime. Moreover, the restructuring of elite networks through purges eliminated alternative centers of power, reinforcing personalist rule and embedding repression within governance structures.

These findings validate the theoretical frameworks of Wintrobe (1998) and Tilly (2003), demonstrating the universality of purges as governance tools while emphasizing their contextual adaptability. Stalin's purges aligned with ideological goals, Saddam's prioritized ethno-sectarian control, and Assad's exploited sectarian cleavages, highlighting the strategic flexibility of purges in maintaining authoritarian stability.

Broader Implications and Contributions to Literature

The cases of Stalin's Soviet Union, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and the Assad regimes reveal the universal logic of purges as tools of authoritarian consolidation. Across these regimes, purges served as both immediate responses to opposition and systemic strategies for restructuring elite dynamics and societal control. Despite differing contexts, all three regimes aligned state violence with broader

governance objectives, adapting methods to their unique vulnerabilities.

This study contributes to the literature on authoritarian resilience by demonstrating how purges transition from reactive acts to routinized governance practices. The adaptability of purges—evident in Stalin's ideological purges, Saddam's ethno-sectarian campaigns, and Assad's sectarian strategies—illustrates their universality as governance tools. By situating purges within Wintrobe's "fear equilibrium" and Tilly's institutionalized violence frameworks, this study offers a comprehensive understanding of political violence in authoritarian regimes.

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