Terrence Lee

Defect or Defend. Military Responses to Popular Protests in Authoritarian Asia.

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Over the last decade, events in the Middle-East have refocused democratization scholarship on the role played by mass movements in triggering authoritarian breakdowns. Much has been written about the conditions that allow for popular uprisings against authoritarian rule, especially how the anticipation of violent repression affects the likelihood of mobilization. However, relatively less is known about the factors that determine whether or not members of the regime's security forces use violence against their compatriots. In other words, faced with popular protests, when is the regime's coercive apparatus likely to remain loyal and when is it likely to defect? In *Defect or Defend*, Terrence Lee argues that the military is more likely to abandon an authoritarian regime when there is rampant factionalism within its ranks. Lee claims that compared to power-sharing regimes, armed forces in personalistic dictatorships are more vulnerable to internal splits and are, therefore, more likely to defect by forming a pact with opposition forces.

The book's theoretical framework is based on the premise that military support is imperative for maintaining authoritarian rule. While existing literature recognizes the importance of repression as a tool of authoritarian control, it generally assumes that the military is a perfect agent of the regime. Lee successfully challenges this assumption by showing that the military's interests can and often do diverge from those of other regime elites. A controlled comparison of four cases is used to substantiate this claim. Regimes in China and Burma were able to preserve their rule by successfully deploying the military's coercive power to quash popular protests. Yet, similar levels of protests brought down long-standing dictatorships in Indonesia and the Philippines, because the military refused orders to use violent force against protestors. The book acknowledges that the military's defection, either by commission (actively aiding regime dissenters) or by omission (refusing to use violence against dissenters), does not guarantee a transition to democratic rule. However, public insubordination by the armed forces denotes a 'material, psychological and moral victory' (p. 3) for the protestors and is critical in precipitating regime breakdown.

What explains the variation in military responses to popular revolts across these cases? The book presents a two-part argument. First, the *probability* of defection depends on the level of factionalism in the armed forces, which is conditioned by the 'institutional heritage' (p. 24) of different regime types. In personalistic regimes, like the Philippines and Indonesia, appointments, pro-

motions, and deployment of military personnel are based on their perceived loyalty to the dictator. Over time, the arbitrary shuffling of these personnel compromises military unity, as factions of marginalized officers seek political alternatives to improve their circumstances. This is why, when a personalistic regime is faced with destabilizing protests, disaffected factions within the armed forces are likely to defect and ally with regime dissenters. In contrast, power-sharing regimes, like China and Burma, maintain institutional constraints on the dictator's ability to interfere in the military's internal affairs. As such, both the career prospects and operational independence of officers are structured in predictable ways, making factionalism less likely. Consequently, power-sharing regimes can more effectively deploy their armed forces to counter threats from below.

Second, the book claims that the *possibility* of actual defection arises only when opposition forces can credibly commit to preserving the military's dominant position in post-transition politics. This protracted process of 'pact' formation between marginalized factions in the military and regime dissenters is often uneven and contradictory. For example, in the Indonesian case, even as the military refrained from opening fire on protestors, it continued to use covert efforts to repress pro-democracy forces. In fact, the military explicitly refused to use violence against dissenters, only after Suharto's key political allies publicly demanded his resignation. A similar lag in military defection can be observed in the Philippines. By situating career concerns of senior officers on the locus of military's institutional interests, Lee advances a nuanced theory that can explain not only the likelihood of military's defection from authoritarian rule, but also its timing.

The book's arguments are presented clearly, and historical evidence used to support the main conclusions demonstrates the author's impressive command of four diverse cases. However, the causal relationship between personalistic rule and military defection remains under-specified. If personalist dictators have high levels of discretion over appointments and deployment in the military, it is not clear why marginalized officers would have the power to decisively withhold coercive power during the protests. Presumably, sidelined military personnel would be banished from the corridors of power. Yet, in both Indonesia and the Philippines, officers in the disaffected faction seem to occupy highly strategic positions when the protests begin. Explicitly theorizing the social and political constraints on the exercise of arbitrary power in personalist regimes could help explain why certain officers may be marginalized but not completely removed from the military's command structure.

Defect or Defend makes several critical contributions to the literature on political transitions. In a marked departure from dominant theories that claim

personalistic regimes are least vulnerable to infighting, Lee claims that the exercise of discretionary power by a personalist dictator fosters *more* factionalism within the armed forces. Furthermore, the argument engages a growing body of scholarship that focuses on the divergence of elite interests to explain regime transitions. While existing literature mostly assumes that the military will do the political elites' bidding, evidence presented in the book proves that this is not always the case. Although it primarily draws on evidence from cases in Asia, the book's theoretical insights will be of interest to scholars who study authoritarianism and democratization in other parts of the world.

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