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0521839890 - Resisting Dictatorship: Repression and Protest in Southeast Asia

Vince Boudreau

Excerpt

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1 Introduction

There are times and places about which nothing seems more significant than the sheer energy and violence that states direct against basic freedoms. The snippets of information that filter from these dictatorial seasons – tales of furtive hiding and tragic discovery; hard times and uneasy sleep – describe lives utterly structured by state repression. Authoritarians bent on taking power, consolidating their rule or seizing resources frequently silence opponents with bludgeons, bullets and shallow graves, and those who find themselves in the path of the state juggernaut probably have trouble even imagining protest or resistance without also calculating the severity or likelihood of state repression. Such considerations surely influence whether individuals take action or maintain a frustrated silence, and will over time broadly shape protest and resistance. They also influence what modes of democracy struggle will emerge or succeed in a given setting. Democracy movements arise against established patterns of contention: their timing, base, and outcome reflect state-movement interactions begun at the dictatorship's outset and reproduced (with adjustments) thereafter, in interactions between repression and contention. Institutions and repertoires of contention that survive, or are ignored by, state repression inform important aspects of anti-dictatorship movements, and influence the role that protest plays in transitions to democracy.

Analysts, however, have seldom attempted to understand *modes* of protest in authoritarian settings – or indeed elsewhere – via its relationship to *styles* of state repression. More often, we have been concerned with quantitative associations between the degree of repression and the extent of protest.¹ Such associations, however, may miss the strategic heart of political contention, in which authorities try to undermine or capture movement activists, discredit their lines of argument, interdict their connection to supporters, and eliminate opportunities for mobilization,

¹ Duff and McCamant 1976; Duvall and Shamir 1980; Rummel 1984; Opp 1989.

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while movement leaders build on whatever opportunities they have, and endeavor to fit activity to specific sets of constraints. To grasp how authoritarian states influence protest requires distinctions *among* repressive strategies, and explanations of how these differences influence political contention.

But how should one distinguish among repressive regimes? How does one gauge authoritarian rule's influences on social protest and dissent? Quantitative answers imagine a more or less linear continuum from utter dictatorship to pure democracy, and locate repression at some point along this range. To fix a regime's character, one gathers information about its degree of openness or brutality. It makes sense, in this view, to ask whether Nigeria or Cambodia is more repressive, and to develop answers based on how often elections, political murders, or press closings take place. In this approach, one can define repression independently of its political consequences, and include physical violence, arrest, preventing assembly and expression, and perhaps even threats to do any of these things. For those compelled to live under a *specific* repressive regime, however, repression's *form* may be as important as its *extent*. A formally democratic state that periodically kills ethnic minorities profoundly affects members of that group. Authorities who tolerate student demonstrations but shoot up picket lines will encourage different contentious forms than those that allow labor a freer hand but clamp down on campus activism. Those who challenge authoritarians – particularly consolidating authoritarians – face off against active, calculating and often cruel adversaries. Citizens cannot plan a strike, a demonstration, a boycott or often even a poetry reading without concern for state reaction, and it makes sense that labor leaders, activists and poets will seek to anticipate, and somehow outflank, state repression.

Authorities facing actual or likely social challenge may attempt to prevent, interrupt or punish dissident expressions in acts we call repression. Following others, we define repression functionally, as coercive acts or threats that weaken resistance to authorities' will.² Defined in these terms, repression runs a broad gamut from physically harming members of society (i.e. summary execution and torture) to limiting activity (i.e. close surveillance, threats, warnings). Our definition regards repression contingently: we will see, for instance, that Indonesian officials often issued threats to dissidents that were expressed in terms of outward support or at least permission. On some universal scale of repression based on quanta of violence or overt menace, such supporting remarks

² Stohl and Lopez 1984: 7; Henderson 1991: 121.

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would likely not qualify. Viewed in relation to the Indonesian historical context of punishment and threat, however, they certainly do.

This work explores how particular modes of state attack encourage specific patterns of political contention. Regime opponents anticipate state activity, search out its pattern, and in light of that pattern, calibrate movement practice to navigate between the innocuous and the suicidal. Some movements abandon activist forms crushed by surveillance and violence, others challenge prohibitions, or act evasively. Impending or recollected repression warns protesters away from some acts, and pushes them toward others, either because of the collective memory or more direct menace. Some dissidents are schooled by older comrades; others are haunted by their elimination. Apart from activists' explicit perceptions and intentions, moreover, state repression influences protest and resistance by changing movement organizations and oppositional cultures. Repressive patterns sometimes emerge with relative clarity, and I examine how and why this might be so. But even where state activity is more erratic, dissidents will have little choice but to forecast and adjust to state repression, because heedless mobilization carries such high costs in authoritarian settings.

I compare the Burmese, Indonesian and Philippine cases to illustrate the variety of repressive strategies available to states, and the connection between each strategy and modes of collective action and resistance. In defining the universe of cases in this way, I hope to persuade readers that repression does not operate in similar ways across settings, nor does it vary systematically between more and less democratic or developed settings. Careful comparison among these countries persuades me that case-specific interaction between authorities and challengers, identified most starkly by different patterns of political repression, initiate path-dependent sequences of contention. Naturally, contention in the cases will respond to some common triggers. Philippine, Indonesian and Burmese democracy movements, for instance, display some similar elements, which may help to explain the occurrence of anti-regime mobilization. A charismatic female leader led each, each unfolded during periods of acute economic crisis, and each opposed a regime under increasing international pressure. Still, important variations in the process and outcome of struggle in each case reflect deeper and historically established contentious patterns, patterns essential to understanding how economic or political crisis plays out.

The accounts begin with the rise of men who would become their country's most important post-war dictators – Ne Win, Suharto and Ferdinand Marcos. Each developed initial strategies of attack to secure and consolidate power, and these strategies provided templates for later

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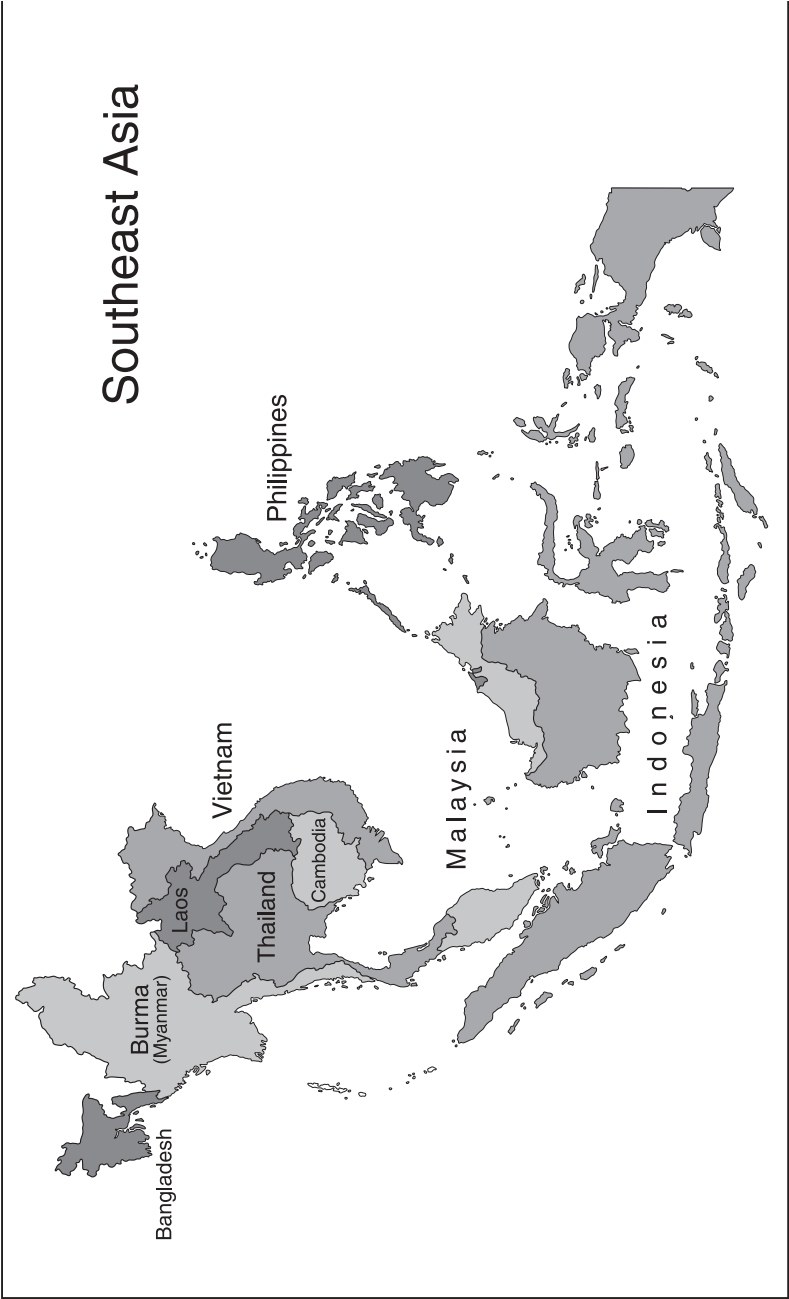
state activity, although this activity also developed and evolved over time for each. Repression in the cases sorts into three simple models. Ne Win moved with swift and deadly violence against any open protest or dissent in lowland Burma, driving resistance underground or to the country's frontier-based insurgencies. Suharto murdered an astounding number of Indonesian communists in the PKI (*Partia Komunis Indonesia*, Indonesian Communist Party) then rooted out or constrained other opposition *organizations*, but less regularly had authorities attack demonstrations, particularly in urban, or central areas. Ferdinand Marcos's contradictory efforts to terrorize opponents and legitimize his regime required that he divide insurgents from moderate, less-organized and semi-legal activists. From these beginnings, regimes and movements tried to thwart one another by adjusting to new threats and opportunities, learning from mistakes, adapting to new conditions.

Interactions between state repression and movement response (what I will refer to as patterns of political contention) establish broader themes in mobilization and demobilization by underwriting context-specific ideas about what constitutes a political opportunity, what movement goals will attract support, and what modes of struggle will likely prosper. Roughly similar events in different settings – elections, newly restrictive press laws, and economic downturns – produce radically different modes of political contention. Over time, a relational logic emerges in the state and social sides of political struggle that informs authorities' views about the difference between harmless and subversive mobilization, governs what challenges provoke state attacks, and structures consequent political contention. I work from these patterned relations toward a perspective on the confrontations between state and democracy movement that ended each dictator's reign.

Three state attacks and movement legacies

A dictatorship may impose itself on society most powerfully in grinding daily encounters between authority and subjects. Nevertheless, authorities often etch the lessons, threats and warnings fundamental to the regime in extraordinary moments of confrontation and repression. At such times, the state wades into society to emphasize or rewrite its rules, often via attacks that crush some opponents and eliminate some modes of activism. Across time and space, moreover, authorities often choose between clearly distinct patterns of repression. Human rights advocates and journalists may dwell on regime brutality as unreasoning and inhuman. Yet something *more* menacing than lapses in rationality or compassion probably guides many attacks: a cold logic and methodology geared

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to specific objectives that constitute clear political lessons and more veiled threats to generations of dissidents. State attacks leave legacies of fear and caution that realign authoritarian rule and social resistance for years. Consider, the rough outline of three political and military coups.

Just over three months after seizing power in March 1962, members of the Burmese military, or *Tatmadaw*, arrived at Rangoon University's campus to confront student protests. On that day, demonstrators stood near the university's student union-building, from where they denounced military rule and protested General Ne Win's coup. Several uncertain minutes after the soldiers surrounded the building, students shook off their initial apprehension, and some even shouted insults at the soldiers. A uniformed figure separated from the uniformed ranks, gave a signaling wave, and the troops opened fire. Many students were wounded, killed, or arrested, while others took shelter within the union building. Hours later, military personnel padlocked the building and dynamited it to the ground – killing a still undetermined number hiding within.³ According to many, the attack shocked Burmese observers, but so did the status of the target in their national pantheon. Burmese students in the anti-British nationalist movement had erected that student union, under British auspices, after pitched struggle. It figured centrally in the independence struggle, had sheltered students in the first nationalist organizations, had been a nationalist womb and shrine for over thirty years.⁴ The shootings and explosion constituted the opening moment in the new regime's campaign utterly to prevent protest in post-coup Burma; there could not have been a more pointed or dramatic place to deliver the opening salvo. In its aftermath, student activists one by one slipped into the countryside to join insurgent and underground forces. Between 1962 and 1988, fewer than six demonstrations, clustered in 1968 and around 1974 to 1975, disturbed the *urban* peace Ne Win built that day; all ended in bloodshed.⁵

A different sort of murder began in late October 1965 in Indonesia. There, ABRI (*Angkatan Bersenjata Republik Indonesia*, the Armed Forces of the Republic of Indonesia) set out to consolidate power after outmaneuvering an attempted coup, most likely planned by junior officers from Central Java. Seven of ABRI's most senior officers died in that coup,

³ Accounts on the exact character of the attack, and the body count, vary. Smith (1997) quotes *The Times* (July 9, 1962) that the death toll was in the thousands with students inside the union. Lintner (1994, 1990) quite definitively asserts that students were inside the building, while Silverstein and Wohl (1964) report fewer deaths, and an empty building.

⁴ Moscotti 1974.

⁵ Lintner 1994.

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and only General Suharto, then commanding the KOSTRAD (*Komando Cadangan Strategis Angkatan Darat*, or Army Strategic Reserve Command) seemed positioned to turn back the challenge. In this moment (or perhaps sometime earlier) Suharto glimpsed an opportunity to eliminate ABRI's arch-rival for national power, the PKI; under his leadership, the army stirred the flames of suspicion surrounding the PKI's role in the coup to full-throated outrage. By the end of October, soldiers led a campaign to murder and arrest Indonesian communists, for which they found willing allies in some rural, largely Islamic groups.⁶ Six months later, between 300,000 and 1,000,000 people were dead, mainly on Java, Bali and Sumatra.⁷ Soldiers carried out a great many of these killings, but also provided logistical and intelligence support, as well as ideological encouragement to civilian groups. It bears mention that the American CIA *also* contributed intelligence to the operation.⁸ When the killings stopped, no organized opposition to Suharto existed. Except for separatist movements in Aceh, Irian Jaya and East Timor, the New Order state virtually prevented organized opposition to its rule from that point forward.⁹

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, elected once by popular vote and once by massive fraud, decided in mid-1972 that he was through with constitutional restraints on his power, and declared martial law. To that point, his regime had already done much to concentrate traditionally decentralized power in the national executive. Under martial law, Marcos suspended civil institutions like the Supreme Court and Legislature, and thereafter ruled via unilateral presidential decree. In the days following the September 23 public declaration of martial law, moreover, he imprisoned his parliamentary rivals and a broad range of activists from campuses, labor unions and the recently organized Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). Four months later, according to an Amnesty International report, some 30,000 people had been detained.¹⁰ For a time, under state pressure, the urban sites of protest – the Plaza Miranda, Mendiola Bridge, and the Liwasang Bonifacio – were becalmed. In the countryside, invigorated military pursuit dealt heavy setbacks to the armed CPP/NPA (New People's Army) insurgency.

⁶ Anderson and McVey 1971; Crouch 1978; Schulte-Nordholdt 1987.

⁷ Collin Cribb provides a sensitive account of the difficulties surrounding any effort definitively to count the number of people killed in the massacre. His survey of different efforts to arrive at a final tally includes more than twenty attempts, which range from low estimates of 150,000 killed to a high of 1,000,000, Cribb 1990: 12.

⁸ See Simmons 2000: 179–181; and Robinson 1984; Scott 1985.

⁹ Cribb 1990; Fein 1993; Robinson 1995.

¹⁰ Amnesty International 1977.

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However, Marcos was more dependent on US support than either Ne Win or Suharto, and from the first he tried to legitimize martial law to placate American policymakers. This effort gave elite oppositionists, many of whom were soon released from jail, opportunities to position themselves against the regime. Meanwhile, Marcos's heavy-handed counterinsurgency in the countryside was undermined by the dictates of fighting the Muslim insurgency in the South, and by Marcos's greater attention to state building. Hence by 1975, both the urban protest movement and the organized rural insurgency had rebounded, and remained active (sometimes operating in tandem, often separately) through Marcos's remaining years as president.¹¹

How should one think comparatively about these cases? The social movements literature has often treated Third World cases mainly as contrasts to industrial society.¹² If we think along these lines, we may well consider it appropriate to describe the three as similar: generic Third World, authoritarian or even Southeast Asian examples of state crackdowns on social opposition. Each state attempted to expand and consolidate strong central power, and to that end threw off earlier post-colonial regimes. We might note authorities' apparently easy resort to violence, or recognize that in the Cold War's descending darkness, each attack (even in *socialist* Burma) hoisted the pennant of anti-communism, and used it for decades to justify some of the region's most horrific abuses.

Yet perhaps more interesting comparative gains await those willing to explore *differences* among Indonesia, Burma and the Philippines, and to consider broad possibilities for how states may respond to opposition. If we think about repression as strategic, we might ask where and how it occurs, and with what legacies. We would soon discover important diversity across the three cases, hints of larger comparative issues. The Burmese military killed students engaged in urban protest, and then devoted its greatest attention to eliminating any visible sign of dissent from their society. After the 1962 student-union massacre shocked Burmese society into silence, the government set to work eliminating protest from Burmese society, and particularly from the cities. Most activists evaded detection by taking great care and few risks. Some students withdrew into an underground existence, and in 1964 joined BCP (Burma Communist Party) cadres in their countryside bases. Authorities made little effort to stop the student exodus, and seemed content to police urban territory and quash the threat of new mass protest. The regime

¹¹ Wurfel 1988; Thompson 1995.¹² Boudreau 1996; Ponna 1993.

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was then also busy eliminating structures and institutions that supported student protest (at first), and broader dissent thereafter. Throughout, the shock of the campus murders underscored the deadly consequences of renewed protest or open dissent.

Indonesian state violence eliminated the PKI's entire organization – first killing many of its members and then driving others into hiding or silence. The slaughter reached the greatest heights in rural areas where the communist party had strong support from rural farmers – which hints at an important strategic decision. Forces working to seize and consolidate national power may first build countryside bases in preparation for larger and more central battles – a classic guerilla strategy. But why would a powerfully central institution like ABRI so strongly focus on provincial struggles, and not concentrate most on wresting control from civil authority in the cities (as the *Tatmadaw* had done in Burma)? Indeed, in the midst of the struggle between an increasingly weakened Sukarno and a rising Suharto, the General took an instructive gamble: he allowed and encouraged Indonesian students to protest against the president. Admittedly, these protests allied themselves with the military leadership. Yet mass demonstrations are risky and unpredictable affairs, less congenial tools than others a hierarchical military might take up.

Here, then, we find two contrasts between the Indonesian and the Burmese assaults: first, and most clearly, while the *Tatmadaw* eliminated protest but allowed protesters to escape into the underground, ABRI killed members of the communist organization, but allowed protest to occur in the cities, even after those protests began to turn against his rule. Second, the Burmese fought the students in the cities to claim that strategic territory, but Suharto eliminated a rival organization – and devoted most attention to areas where the PKI was strongest – even if this meant taking the struggle to places like Bali and Northern Sumatra with comparatively less strategic value. Indeed, in Java's largest and most central cities, he allowed the largest and most organized protests.

In contrast, Marcos's martial law struck at both opposition organizations and protest, but with considerably less vigor or focus. Campaigns against insurgent organizations and more moderate protesters betrayed some equivocation on the new dictator's part. Under US pressure, and more a politician himself than either Suharto or Ne Win, Marcos was unable to keep most parliamentary opponents jailed for more than several months. Many had advance warning and slipped away to the United States or into the countryside before or during the clampdown. The military's efforts against the insurgency never achieved the energy or ruthlessness that Suharto mustered against the PKI, nor did Marcos have existing anti-communist antagonisms in his society such as those

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that accelerated the Indonesian slaughter, for communism had shallow roots in Philippine experience. Marcos, in fact, devoted less of his initial attention to specific opponents than to reworking the Philippine state's legal and institutional foundations to expand his power. In contrast, Suharto wiped out the PKI before constructing the New Order's apparatus, and Burma waited twelve years for its socialist constitution.

What lessons do these comparisons yield? The scope of state violence differs sharply among the cases. The Indonesian massacre far outstrips anything in Burma or the Philippines, and Burma's crackdown was more violent than Philippine events. These differences do influence subsequent patterns of contention, particularly in Indonesia, where the specter of mass murder haunts all forms of dissent. But more than levels of violence, sharper and more significant differences in the *logics* of violence and repression distinguish the cases from one another. Burmese authorities drove all dissent far underground, where it was preserved but encapsulated in the form of armed insurgencies or secret cells. The Indonesian campaign against the PKI began a consistent state effort to draw an uncompromising line this side of organization: dissidents could protest, but protesters could not organize. Hence the Burmese and Indonesian state strategies exactly reversed one another. The Philippine effort fell somewhere in between, for Marcos was able neither decisively to eliminate the armed insurgent organization or its underground party, nor long silence less-organized, more moderate and open protest. After their authoritarian onsets, actors in each state developed new plans to defeat resistance and extend power, but generally built on and refreshed the politico-institutional legacies of the original attack.

Of these legacies, which are most important? I concentrate on three. The first is institutional and material. State repression killed, bruised, imprisoned and terrified citizens, but seldom indiscriminately. Most focused on specific targets, and so shaped the material and organizational resources that survived, promoting political forms that escaped the state's most direct proscription. Often, forms that authorities judge least threatening survived – as with student protests in 1970s Indonesia. Elsewhere, forms survived because authorities had neither the capacity nor will to defeat them – as with insurgencies in both the Philippines and Burma. Activist forms and organizations, however, do not exist independently of activists. Repression shapes the duration, direction and intensity of activist careers in ways that profoundly influence political contention. Where activist forms and organizations survive state attack, generations of experienced dissidents bring their accumulated wisdom and leadership to the struggle, and provide a thicker and more complex network of support for new protest. Elsewhere, authorities may eliminate entire