RELATIONAL PUNISHMENT, DEFECTION, AND RESISTANCE DEMOBILIZATION IN REPRESSIVE REGIMES: EVIDENCE FROM TAIWAN'S 'WHITE TERROR' PERIOD

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ABSTRACT. Why do governments severely punish some dissidents while showing mercy to others? This study argues that when constrained by limited information on dissent, states have incentives to cast the net of repression wider by killing not just key dissent actors but members closely connected to them to ensure demobilization. States also crave information, and showing clemency to defectors who bring in information helps improve intelligence. However, tips have different values and regimes are particularly interested in rewarding defectors who are close to key actors and thus possess high-value tips that can help the regime pursue key fugitives and dissolve resistance more efficiently. Using newly declassified data on political victims during Taiwan's "White Terror" authoritarian period, I find that the regime tends to execute both key actors (i.e., leaders and recruiters) and their closely connected members. Defectors who bring in information tend to receive mercy, but defectors closely connected to key actors are much less likely to die than those less connected defectors. These findings shed new insight into the toolkit dictators use to compensate for information deficit in repressing resistance movements.

Keywords: State repression, information, defection, underground resistance networks, authoritarian control