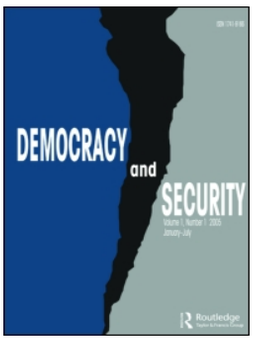

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Democracy and Security

ISSN: 1741-9166 (Print) 1555-5860 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fdas20

Terence Lee: Defect or Defend: Military Responses to Popular Protests in Authoritarian Asia

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To cite this article: Jeroen Gelsing (2017) Terence Lee: Defect or Defend: Military Responses to Popular Protests in Authoritarian Asia, Democracy and Security, 13:2, 168-172, DOI: 10.1080/17419166.2017.1325684

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17419166.2017.1325684

DEMOCRACY AND SECURITY
2017, VOL. 13, NO. 2, 168–172

Routledge
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Terence Lee: *Defect or Defend: Military Responses to Popular Protests in Authoritarian Asia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).

In defiance of democracy's *fin de siècle* momentum, dictatorships today survive—even thrive. In recognition of this reality, authoritarian durability studies are proliferating. Swept up in this academic trend, the region of Southeast Asian is experiencing a modest popularization in political science. Scholars are tapping the fertile comparative soil of this understudied patch of the globe in a bid to illuminate complex issues of regime trajectories. Terence Lee's *Defect or Defend*, subtitled *Military Responses to Popular Protests in Authoritarian Asia*, fits neatly in both of these burgeoning trends, concentrating on Southeast Asia while offering insights into the varying success of democratic transition as well as sources of authoritarian resilience. In doing so, it follows hot on the heels of monographs by Dan Slater[1] and Tuong Vu,[2] which ask similar big questions with equally big perspectives.

Taking its cue from transitology, *Defect or Defend* investigates "how and why popular demonstrations [against authoritarian rule] can succeed" (p. 18). Lee's work employs civil–military relations theory and, in crafting an answer, draws on the dichotomy between highly personalized dictatorships, where one individual wields the state's despotic power, and "nonpersonalistic forms of autocratic rule," which disperse power between the ruling circle. Highly personalistic dictatorial rule must generate politicization of the country's armed forces by the autocrat, Lee contends. This, in turn, creates "winners and losers" in the military ranks, leading to "disaffection within the armed forces and creat[ing] favorable conditions for military defections when mass protests erupt" (p. 5). By contrast, non-personalist regimes do not evidence politicization-induced military disaffection. Consequently, "military defection is unlikely to occur and armed forces … are more likely to brutally put down popular demonstrations" (pp. 5–6). As such, these authoritarian regimes persist.

Defend or Defend is ambitious in scope, embracing four case studies as well as a chapter dedicated to testing its theory's external validity. The case studies comprise two instances of successful popular uprising against a dictatorship (Philippines 1986 and Indonesia 1998) and two instances of authoritarian military crackdown on protestors (China 1989 and Burma 2007). Together, this amounts to a most similar research design rooted in Mill's methods. "[P]rotest size, issue area, location, and protestor profile" (p. 7) are held constant, shifting the explanatory weight to the dichotomy between personalistic rule and the utilization of consultative, or "power-sharing," political institutions outlined above. The familiar shortcomings of "small-n, many variables" are remedied through the well-executed use of process tracing. The resulting narratives are rich and detailed, and the breadth of sources consulted is impressive, even if the latter are predominantly secondary in nature.

Defect or Defend convincingly traces the causal chain tying elite politics to the varying success of popular uprising, thus reinforcing O'Donnell and Schmitter[3] and their famous maxim that "there is no transition whose beginning is not the consequence—direct or indirect—of important divisions within the authoritarian regime itself." The intricate dynamics of the rivalry between Generals Ver and Ramos in the Philippines, which led the military to defect from President Marcos's side when faced with the concerted street protests of 1986, are charted in close and persuasive detail. Similarly, Lee's portrayal of

Suharto's regression into personalism and its effects on civil–military unity stands out as a forte.

On the theoretical front, however, several question marks surround the book. Does authoritarianism necessarily lead to personalism? Lee insists that authoritarian regimes must "culminat[e] eventually with the personalization of autocratic power" (p. 56). In Lee's *theoretical* view, then, dictatorships are diachronically subject to the dismantling of power-sharing institutions in favor of single-person dominance. Yet one may take issue with this interpretation of personalism as the authoritarian late-game—previous academic writing has shown that regime transitions, including democratic ones, occur from all regime types.[4] And certainly Lee's *empirical* chapters, particularly his case study of Deng Xiaoping's China, call into question the rigor of this earlier theoretical contention by observing that "authoritarianism … had become *less* personalistic" under Deng's rule (p. 160, my italics). Deng reversed the Mao personality cult and his predecessor's supra-institutional position, reviving instead an earlier tradition of collective rule-based leadership and restoring intra-party unity.

This internal contradiction perhaps finds its roots in *Defect or Defend* putting personalism into boots it cannot fill. Lee initially insists on "not regard[ing] personalism as a regime type of its own," instead casting it "as a continuous trait that may be more or less evident in authoritarian institutions" (p. 38). Yet the book's final chapter explicitly defines personalism and regimes "that share power" as a binary "two typologies" (pp. 189, 197, 199). But are power-sharing and personalism full antipoles, or is personalism merely a *form* of non-power-sharing? Lee's research design is forgiving of the equation of non-power-sharing with personalism; however, it forces him into theoretical assertions challenged by empirical reality.

In fact, a readily available, prominent conceptual alternative—that of elite cohesion (or unity) and its antithesis of elite fragmentation (or disunity)—seems to equally explain Lee's case study variation. While the language of unity and coherence pervades Lee's fifth chapter on Burma and China, the concept of elite cohesion is not mentioned until the closing pages of the book (p. 199). Sure enough, elite cohesion and fragmentation are experiencing a swift rise as independent variables in comparative studies of regime outcomes, including such landmark output as Jason Brownlee's *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (2007),[5] Tuong Vu's *Paths to Development in Asia* (2010), Levitsky and Way's (forthcoming) work on the durability of revolutionary regimes, and Dan Slater's *Ordering Power* (2010), a study of authoritarian regime survival in Southeast Asia (and direct structuralist competitor to *Defect or Defend*). Lee thus misses an opportunity to anchor his findings directly inside a rapidly expanding body of literature. Further, thinking of the Philippines–Indonesia versus Burma–China dichotomy in terms of elite (dis)unity releases personalism from its ambiguous position and frees it to signify a particular *manifestation* of elite malcohesion with unique characteristics and survival implications—arguably, Lee's original intention. Indeed, if Lee had written that dictatorship must eventually culminate with *disunity* over autocratic power, few would have disagreed with him.

Conceptual quibbles aside, *Defect or Defend* illuminates clearly how personalist dictators are locked in an iteration of the dictators' dilemma—a situation where managing a multitude of anti-regime challenges requires security tradeoffs[6]—even if these dynamics are not expounded on in the book itself. Lee's monograph identifies several core characteristics of highly personalized regimes: politically motivated appointments to high command, frequent reshuffles of top office holders, the encouragement of personal rivalries, and the rise of "sycophantic lieutenants" (p. 40). As we have seen, such political

meddling and intervention in the military hierarchy breeds armed forces discontent with the autocrat. Consequently, Lee dubs these symptoms "conditions for elite defection" (p. 56), since the intra-military discontent that politicization engenders may initiate defection during times of contentious politics and may erode the willingness and readiness of (elements of) the armed forces to crack down. Yet if personalistic rule is vulnerable to collapse through popular demonstrations, why would dictators embrace what is presented as a losing strategy?

It is here that the dictators' dilemma becomes evident. It is conceivable, I would submit, that these symptoms of personalism—this elite disunity— indicates not just weakness but, paradoxically, also a form of regime resilience. Although politicization of the armed forces is admittedly hazardous in times of contentious politics, the political control it affords the dictator over intra-elite challenges during normal times arguably prolongs his tenure in office. After all, should the dictator pursue the inverse course and refrain from politicizing the military, he may be forced from office in a manner that afflicts the "vast majority of dictators" (p. 25)—removal by his own inner circle. Personalism, then, could be a double-edged sword, a regime type that facilitates the dictator's survival by preempting intra-elite challenges, yet one that simultaneously induces regime weakness to popular protest as a direct consequence of the effect of such politicization on civil–military cohesion. Seen in this light, personalism could even be a veritable regime survival strategy—a deliberately instigated *form* of elite disunity—carrying both risks and rewards.

In fairness, Lee aspires to investigate the varying success of People Power movements, not to theorize about interim survival or the longevity of personalist regimes. Yet his work makes important contributions to our understanding of personalism. First, the delicateness of the double-edged sword, or dilemma, of personalism that is implicit in Lee's work goes some way toward elucidating these regimes' quantitatively demonstrated fragility.[7] Second, Lee's empirical work illustrates that the march toward personalism is not necessarily a one-way street. As evident from Lee's China case, regime personalization may be reversible, at a minimum after the death of the erstwhile personalist dictator and in presence of a legacy of power-sharing institutions. Nor does personalism, incidentally, appear to be an inevitable outcome when faced with initial elite disunity. Lee's case study of Indonesia under Suharto during the early years of the New Order reveals that an autocrat can actively win the allegiance of the military without personalizing it, thus achieving elite cohesion.

These last points raise the issue of agency—not of the defending or defecting military apparatus but of the dictator itself. Barbara Geddes's data on authoritarian longevity[8] reveals large variance within the lifespan of highly personalistic regimes, from a handful of years to several decades. Whether this simply means that some personalist dictators struck it lucky, whether they developed a method of durably, or at least enduringly, combining the personalization of power with relative elite cohesion (thus surmounting a form of dictators dilemma), or whether they developed some method of containing the specter of popular uprising—perhaps through clever use of state capacity—remains an object for future research. It seems possible, in any event, that causality rests in the quality of *execution* of a dictator's personalist survival strategy. Lee hints at this when he writes that top Philippine general Fidel Ramos "had no qualms about defecting" from President Marcos in 1986 because Marcos had treated rival general Fabien Ver "preferentially" (p. 189). One is left to wonder whether Ramos would have supported Marcos had the president managed the "balance of power between Ramos and Ver" better. As it was, the Ramos–Ver equilibrium

collapsed and devolved into an "all-or-nothing struggle for leadership of the military" (p. 103) in the 1980s only when "Marcos's health began to fail" (p. 88). In an alternate history where Marcos handled his politicized military competently, the fate of People Power might have been uncertain.

A last theoretical comment concerns the apparent tension between proximate and structural explanations for the varying regime outcomes captured in Lee's case selection. *Defect or Defend* explicitly holds the character of the anti-regime demonstrations constant, permitting variation in authoritarian institutions to come to the foreground. But what explains this variation? If personalism truly is the culmination of the authoritarian life-cycle, this raises the follow-up question of why the Philippines and Indonesia moved toward personalism swiftly, while the PRC and Burma retain(ed) their power-sharing institutions for a (much) longer duration. Are China and Myanmar anomalies, or is there an explanation for their behavior?

While Lee's research objectives do not reach into this territory, this question is nonetheless theoretically relevant. Recent structuralist scholarly work highlights how regime bonds forged in conflict are more durable than other regime founding premises, including, certainly, the tenuous personalist civil–military relations that Lee describes.[9] The PRC was founded out of the barrel of a gun through a bloody civil war, while the *Tatmadaw* fought a multi-decade insurgency to preserve the territorial integrity of the nation. This contrasts sharply with the Philippines, whose armed forces were historically never beholden to a specific mission or party, and whose political institutions were never particularly potent even before Marcos relegated them to dysfunctional, feeble "window-dressing." Is it possible, then, that the elite cohesion generated by the Chinese and Burmese "long struggles" also explains both the absence of personalism *and* the military's determination to crack down in China and Burma?

Finally, what remains is to assess the portability of the main argument advanced by *Defect or Defend*. As the concluding chapter demonstrates, Lee's assertions withstand reasonably well the extrapolative test of explaining the collapse of select other personalist regimes (Arab Spring Egypt and Tunisia; the Color Revolutions in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine). Yet there exist personalist dictatorships whose militaries did not (fully) defect when pressured by popular uprising. The case of Syria under Bashar al-Assad, and Steven Heydemann's work[10] coupling this enduring loyalty of key military segments to the Alawite sectarian nature of the Assad regime, comes to mind. Indeed, Lee freely concedes his argument does not travel well to the Arab Spring cases of Libya, Syria, and Bahrain (p. 191), since the parameters of public protest he identifies do not incorporate the ethnic identity of protestors vis-à-vis that of the regime. If power-sharing institutions form an explanation for non-personalist authoritarian longevity, perhaps military "investedness"[11] rooted in ethnic characteristics is an explanation for personalist regime resilience.

To conclude, *Defect or Defend* is a thought-provoking book that should be on the reading lists of all who research civil–military relations and authoritarian survival. It is highly valuable for its in-depth discussion of personalism and the intra-regime distortions it introduces. Additionally, Lee's admonishment that militaries are "not perfect agents of the regime" emerges convincingly from the book and should be well-heeded by scholars of authoritarian survival (p. 14). Nonetheless, it is fair to say that Lee's book raises as many questions as it answers, but in this reviewer's view, that is a strength, not a weakness. As the author himself notes, *Defect or Defend* presents but "a starting point for theory generation," presenting "a wider research agenda begging for further investigation" (p. 197).

Notes

1. Dan Slater, *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
2. Tuong Vu, *Paths to Development in Asia: South Korea, Vietnam, China, and Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
3. Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).
4. Axel Hadenius and Jan Teorell, "Pathways from Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 1 (2007): 143–57.
5. Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).
6. Milan Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
7. Barbara Geddes, "What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?," *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, no. 1 (1999): 115–44.
8. Ibid.
9. Slater, *Ordering Power*; Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, "The Durability of Revolutionary Regimes," *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 3 (2013): 5–17.
10. Steven Heydemann, "Syria and the Future of Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 4 (2013): 59–73.
11. Eva Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 2 (2004): 139–57.

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https://doi.org/10.1080/17419166.2017.1325684