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Violent Origins of Authoritarian Variation: Rebellion Type and Regime Type in Cold War Southeast Asia

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Abstract
Dictatorships are every bit as institutionally diverse as democracies, but where does this variation come from? This article argues that different types of internal rebellion influence the emergence of different types of authoritarian regimes. The critical question is whether rebel forces primarily seek to seize state power or to escape it. Regional rebellions seeking to escape the state raise the probability of a military-dominated authoritarian regime, since they are especially likely to unify the military while heightening friction between civilian and military elites. Leftist rebellions seeking to seize the state are more likely to give rise to civilian-dominated dictatorships by inspiring ‘joint projects’ in which military elites willingly support party-led authoritarian rule. Historical case studies of Burma, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam illustrate the theory, elaborating how different types of violent conflict helped produce different types of dictatorships across the breadth of mainland and island Southeast Asia during the Cold War era.

Keywords: authoritarianism; rebellion; militarries; Southeast Asia

A recent upsurge in comparative political research has established how analytically untenable it is to define authoritarianism as a residual category – that is, as simply the absence of democracy. Far from being radically unpredictable products of shifting autocratic whim, dictatorships are as profoundly shaped by their institutional features as democracies. Furthermore, they are also every bit as institutionally diverse. These institutional differences among authoritarian regimes shape divergence in a wide range of important outcomes, from economic development (Gehlbach and Keefer 2012) to war propensity (Weeks 2014) to the durability of authoritarianism itself (e.g. Brownlee 2007; Gandhi 2008).

The most important institutional distinction to emerge from this new wave of research is the contrast between authoritarian regimes in which power primarily rests in a civilian ruling party, and those in which the military is the dominant
organized actor. Although new typologies of authoritarian regimes abound, every single one of them treats the military vs. party dimension with paramount importance.\(^1\) The distinction is not merely interesting for purposes of description, but pivotal for purposes of explanation. Indeed, there is arguably no feature of authoritarian regimes during the Cold War era that better predicts their durability after the Cold War than whether they were dominated by party or military institutions (Geddes 1999; Huntington 1991).

Yet scholars of comparative politics have not systematically theorized or empirically addressed the vital prior question: Why have these critically different types of authoritarian regimes emerged in different cases? This article begins addressing this lacuna on the origins of authoritarian subtypes by addressing a parallel understudied question in the literature: How have different types of violent conflict shaped the emergence of different types of political regimes?\(^2\)

The only major research tradition exploring the macro-level political effects of violent conflict is what we might call the ‘war made the state’ literature. Ever since Charles Tilly (1975) made this claim in the European context, scholars interested in the political effects of violence have understandably been preoccupied with the question of how international war affects state power. But cross-border wars are far from the only kind of violent conflict – indeed, they make up an ever-shrinking share of violent conflicts around the world – and state formation is far from the only system-level outcome of interest in comparative politics. Might violent conflicts affect other macro-political features of domestic politics besides their long-recognized consequences for state formation?

This article focuses on the question of how internal rebellion type affects authoritarian regime type. More specifically, it theorizes the divergent political effects of two distinctive types of violent conflict on two different types of authoritarian regimes. To be sure, violent rebellions and authoritarian regimes both represent exceedingly complex phenomena that defy straightforward dichotomous coding. Assigning a single type to either real-world rebellions or authoritarian regimes is thus a perilous business. Hybridity, not clarity, is the messy order of the day.

Yet a broad consensus has emerged that at least one main dividing line can pass empirical muster when distinguishing types of rebellions on the one hand, and authoritarian regimes on the other. As noted above, authoritarian regimes can be broadly divided into those in which the military serves as the primary political actor, and those in which civilians – especially leaders of a ruling party – call the most important shots. Meanwhile, in the growing literature on internal conflicts and civil wars, a common distinction has arisen between centre-seeking rebellions on the one hand and separatist rebellions on the other (Gleditsch et al. 2002).\(^3\) These are also sometimes depicted as ideological insurgencies, which seek to seize the state and remake it in their own image; and regional rebellions, which are less inclined to overthrow the state than to escape it altogether and establish an entirely new polity. Since this article is primarily concerned with the Cold War origins of different types of authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia, it focuses on the specific type of ideological and centre-seeking rebellion that dominated that region – and indeed the entire postcolonial world – during the key period of interest: leftist (or Marxist) rebellions seeking not merely to seize state power, but to radically redistribute wealth after doing so.
One can thus defensibly claim that dictatorships range from: (1) civilianized to (2) militarized in their patterns of institutional dominance, and that rebellions range from: (1) centre-seeking and leftist-Marxist ideological to (2) separation-seeking and territorial-regional in character. These two rough distinctions provide the foundation for this article’s central argument: regional rebellions, more than any other type of internal conflict, tend to give rise to regime militarization. By contrast, leftist rebellions aiming to seize state power should be less likely to induce regime militarization, and especially likely to produce authoritarian civilianization. In sum, regional rebellions should be broadly associated with the onset of military-led authoritarian regimes, while centre-seeking leftist rebellions are more likely to give rise to dictatorships dominated by a civilian ruling party.

The next section elaborates the coalitional logic of my causal argument linking regional rebellions to regime militarization and linking leftist rebellions to regime civilianization. To be clear, the purpose is not to make a monocausal argument for regime outcomes. It is to zero in on one relatively neglected causal factor – type of violence – that we have strong reason to believe should produce especially powerful macro-political effects. The subsequent section details how my argument expands upon my own earlier account of violence and regimes (Slater 2010) and considers some of the tougher issues that arise in coding complex phenomena such as rebellions and authoritarian regimes. I then illustrate my argument through necessarily cursory historical case studies of Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam during the Cold War era.

The coalitional argument

A coalitional approach is required to apprehend the origins of regime militarization and civilianization, perhaps the most significant variation differentiating dictatorships by institutional type. I begin with the assumption that the civilianization of power – in a party-dominated dictatorship as much as in a consolidated democracy – requires military acquiescence to civilian rule. Military leaders are their own principals, not anyone’s agents. Yet they by no means universally prefer to seize power or stay in power. Almost inevitably, militaries are divided (very roughly speaking) between ‘professional’ officers, who view the military’s role as a fighting force that should leave day-to-day governance in civilian hands and focus strictly on operational concerns; and ‘political’ soldiers, who see the military as possessing a historic mission that requires its ongoing involvement in political decision-making as well as security maintenance (Geddes 1999).

Whose preferences prevail depends largely on questions of political context. When civilians appear capable of preserving order and prove willing to defer to military sensitivities on operational and organizational concerns, professional preferences tend to carry the day. It is a perceived breakdown of governance or abuse of military prerogatives under civilian leadership that most often tips the scales towards the political wing, and towards military intervention (Haggard and Kaufman 2016).

By this reckoning, the eternal puzzle of why militaries acquiesce to civilian rule transforms into a question of why militaries ally with civilian leaderships. My assumption is that if military and civilian leaders find themselves in a position of
strong alliance, civilians are more likely to be entrusted with leading the day-to-day operations of the authoritarian regime than if military and civilian preferences diverge. I call this kind of strong civilian–military alliance a joint project. As I explain shortly, such joint projects are especially likely to arise either through leftist political revolutions (Levitsky and Way 2013), or through the right-wing counterrevolutions that emerge to defeat leftist rebels and consolidate an ever-stronger authoritarian status quo (Slater and Smith 2016).

My core assumptions help signal what I do not assume, and must try to explain: (1) military unity, and (2) civilian–military friction. These are the most important facilitating conditions for regime militarization in my theoretical framework. Regime militarization depends first and foremost upon a sharp conflict of interests between military and civilian political elites. Although a simple coup d’etat may arise under conditions of severe military disunity, militarization will not gain traction unless military elites stick together after seizing power. The puzzle then becomes: What causal process might simultaneously worsen civilian–military friction and enhance military unity?

Regional rebellions are an especially likely candidate to perform such political work, through three causal mechanisms: (1) shifting military preferences away from acceptance of civilian leadership; (2) providing a shared operational experience in a setting devoid of civilian logistical support; and (3) offering an opportunity for the majority ethnic group in the military to purge ethnic minorities. Since no other type of conflict is as likely as regional rebellions to unleash these three causal mechanisms, regional rebellions should be especially likely to cause regime militarization.

By contrast, leftist insurgencies seeking to seize state power are especially likely to produce regime civilianization. The first and most straightforward way in which leftist rebellion led to civilianized authoritarianism during the Cold War was through outright insurgent victory. When victorious communist insurgents transformed themselves into ruling communist parties, the regime did not so much undergo a process of civilianization as it was born civilianized. Such revolutionary regimes were never dominated by either the military or a single autocrat lacking institutional backing in the first place. This offers a historicist twist to the argument of Barbara Geddes (1999), Jennifer Gandhi (2008) and Milan Svolik (2012) that the existence of a dominant authoritarian party indicates that autocrats wanted to ‘coup-proof’ or otherwise consolidate their regime. At least in revolutionary cases such as the case of Vietnam below, a party itself founded the regime it would subsequently dominate; whatever ‘coup-proofing’ it had to accomplish, it did so before rather than after seizing power. Nevertheless, the fact that such revolutionary regimes have overwhelmingly remained civilianized over time still constitutes a puzzle. This article’s guiding concept of joint projects helps explain why civilianized dictatorships arising out of leftist rebellions have tended to be immune from militarization – and not just from democratization, as is more commonly recognized (e.g. Levitsky and Way 2013) – over the long haul.

Party-dominated authoritarianism was not only a product of leftist party victory, however. Even when leftist rebels suffered defeat during the Cold War period – as they usually did – I hypothesize that they made regime civilianization more likely. The logic, again, is coalitional. When an armed mass movement attempts not only
to overthrow a government, but to overturn private property and radically redistribute wealth, civilian and military elites face heightened incentives to act collectively for their common self-defence. Leftist rebellions are thus more likely than regional rebellions (or centre-seeking rebellions lacking either redistributive ideologies or the credible capacity to seize state power) to unify civilian and military elite preferences around the imperatives and exigencies of counterrevolution (Slater and Smith 2016). Civilian leaders are most likely to give military leaders the resources they need to combat a rebellion when it threatens not only the lives of soldiers on the distant periphery, but their own power positions as well as the property rights of their wealthiest constituents in the polity’s geographic centre. When this kind of joint project emerges across civilian–military lines, it lessens military leaders’ incentives to displace party politicians and rule in their own right. To the extent that the imperative of collective self-defence comes to override factional and ideological divisions among civilian politicians, the construction of a robust ruling party becomes a less daunting collective-action problem than in ordinary times.

Regional rebellions are a very different kind of violent conflict from leftist rebellions and should have very different coalitional and institutional effects. They typically erupt on the margins of national territory and make no direct overtures to replace the existing government. Nor do they directly threaten the private property of wealthy urban dwellers as a leftist rebellion does. They thus have a less immediate impact on civilian elites, who huddle around major cities (often just the capital city, in many developing countries). Regional rebellions are systematically less likely to pose a significant threat to these civilian elites’ persons, property and privileges. This raises the prospect of a divergence in preferences between the military actors who are fighting and dying to combat the regional rebellion, and the civilian actors who have less at existential stake in how the territorial conflict is conducted and concluded, and see their greatest political priorities lying elsewhere. The upshot is that regional rebellions should be especially likely to exacerbate civil–military tensions, raising the likelihood that military forces will seek to seize government power.

Regime militarization does not simply mean a coup d’état. Regime militarization typically begins with a coup, but a coup does not always commence regime militarization. Coups frequently involve one military faction overthrowing another, rather than any displacement of civilian with military power. Coups also often entail a military effort to replace one set of civilian leaders with another, and not an effort to seize and hold power by military actors in their own right. Regime militarization involves not only a coup, but a concerted and successful military effort to retain power rather than return power to civilians in the coup’s aftermath.

If the military is to retain power, it must remain internally united. Why are regional rebellions especially likely not only to divide military from civilian, but to unify the military itself? To answer this question, it is essential to recognize the two primary reasons why militaries are so often internally divided. First, as noted above, militaries typically exhibit divisions between ‘professional’ soldiers and ‘political’ soldiers. Second, especially in the context of the postcolonial countries that remained most coup-prone during the Cold War era, militaries have often been deeply divided between majority and minority ethnic groups. Colonial authorities frequently recruited their armed forces from minority populations as a
divide-and-conquer tactic, leaving ethnic tensions to plague the postcolonial polity for decades to come (Horowitz 1985).

Regional rebellions can help militaries overcome both the political–professional and the majority–minority divides, through three causal mechanisms. First, regional rebellions can incite change in regime preferences within the military. Civilian politicians’ perceived mismanagement or lack of sufficient concern regarding a regional rebellion can serve as an unacceptable violation of the military’s corporate interests, convincing even ‘professional’ soldiers of the need for political intervention and the decisive sidelining of unhelpful party elites. Sometimes, the military resents civilian leaders for being too soft on separatists, undermining the national and territorial unity that soldiers are socialized to prize. At other times, military resentment focuses on civilians’ perceived use of unnecessary and counterproductive force against an insurgency, forcing their comrades-in-arms to die needlessly in the process. Either way, the key points are: (1) military officers are liable to feel acutely betrayed whenever civilians’ chosen combat tactics diverge from military preferences; and (2) this preference divergence is more likely to emerge during regional rebellions, which are typically a matter of life and death for military elites alone, than during leftist rebellions aiming to capture state power, which are more often a matter of political life and death for civilian and military elites alike.

The loneliness of regional rebellions for military officers is operational as well as political. To borrow James Ron’s (2003) phrasing, states tend to combat insurgent activity in urban ‘ghettos’ with civilian policing, surveillance, and social-welfare measures – not just military force. Hence to the extent that a leftist rebellion draws on urban dwellers and trains its sights on a polity’s major cities, including the capital city it aims to seize, we should expect to find soldiers conducting counterinsurgency both in tandem with, and in protection of, civilian elites. This is highly conducive to the development of a counterrevolutionary joint project in which military officers defer to civilians’ political leadership. On the other side of the coin, leftist movements are only likely to overcome such counterrevolutionary civilian–military alliances and capture national power if they manage to generate impressive cohesion and hierarchical control under a Leninist-style party. This paves the way from leftist rebellion to civilianized, party-led dictatorship through the revolutionary as opposed to the counterrevolutionary pathway.

While leftist rebellions tend to gain inroads in the urban ‘ghettos’ where states conduct counterinsurgency with civilian as well as military forces, states tend to use military force alone on the ‘frontiers’ where regional rebellions tend to erupt (Ron 2003). Separatists are not typically seen as rivals to be succoured or targets to be surveilled, but as traitors to be smashed (Walter 2006). This is the second logic by which regional rebellions are especially likely to unify and politicize the military: such campaigns can provide the kind of shared operational experience that has historically tended to unify the military, making it more prepared to assume power without suffering internal splits (Janowitz 1977).

Regional rebellions can also help unify the military by serving as a ready rationale (and a golden opportunity) for minority purges. Here, leaders from the ethnic core of the military expel what they see as politically unreliable and geographically peripheral minority groups from their ranks. Ethnic-minority
officers are more likely to be directly involved in a regional rebellion than in a leftist rebellion, since their minority status more often manifests itself in territorial than in class or ideological terms. Such direct involvement makes their subsequent purge—and the concomitant ethnic unification of the military—practically a foregone conclusion. Add rising civil–military tensions to strengthening military solidarity, and the political stage is set for the military to seize power as a unified political force.

Although this article’s causal logic is very general, it limits its scope to the Cold War era for three reasons. Firstly, the kind of power-seeking leftist rebellions that are especially conducive to authoritarian civilianization were almost exclusively a Cold War phenomenon (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010). Secondly, although all rebellions obviously take place in some region, the notion of regional rebellion employed here entails an armed effort to alter national boundaries or shift the territorial exercise of state sovereignty. It is thus intrinsically intertwined with the post-1945 United Nations system of territorially demarcated nation-states (Jackson and Rosberg 1982). Finally, the Cold War was a discrete historical epoch for political regimes, in several respects. Superpower support for authoritarian rule was relatively strong, decolonization introduced procedural democracy to most corners of the world for the first time, and dictatorship by parties and militaries became the authoritarian norm—a norm that has become more like the exception in a post-Cold War era when the majority of authoritarian regimes have become multiparty ‘electoral authoritarian’ or ‘competitive authoritarian’ regimes (Levitsky and Way 2010; Schedler 2013). The Cold War era was thus the only period in global history combining ascendant leftist ideology, territorial nation-states and the regime-type divides of interest in this article.

In sum, leftist rebellions are the type of conflict most likely to produce a joint project linking civilian and military elites—either through a revolutionary pathway if the leftists prevail, or a counterrevolutionary pathway if the leftists are defeated. Having been brought together by shared interests and operational experiences in the conduct of violence, civilian and military elites are likely to stick together in a party-led authoritarian regime. Regional rebellions are more likely to drive civilian and military leaders apart, through the two sides’ disparate preferences and experiences regarding the violent conflict. They also offer ideal occasions to purge minority officers and make the military cohesive enough to rule over the long haul. Different types of rebellion foster different types of elite coalitions, which encourage institutionally different types of authoritarian regimes in turn.

Although I have thus far expressed my arguments through their deductive logic, their origins are largely inductive. Building on Slater (2010), I elaborate a rebellion-centred explanation for the origins of party-dominated vs. military-dominated authoritarian regimes. In offering an argument on regime origins, I depart from the focus of my earlier work, which traced the effects of different types of contentious politics—a broader category than the narrower focus on rebellions here—on authoritarian durability. The present analysis also tackles the revolutionary case and pathway of Vietnam, whereas all seven cases in my previous work were counterrevolutionary regimes. This move to incorporate revolutionary as well as counterrevolutionary dictatorships counsels the introduction of joint projects as a
type of coalition that transcends the revolutionary–counterrevolutionary divide. Joint projects are a broader and more encompassing concept than the ‘protection pacts’ emphasized in my previous research, which are counterrevolutionary coalitions by definition.

Coding considerations
Speaking of definitions, it is essential to lay out some coding guidelines for the rebellion types and regime types of interest before commencing the four Southeast Asian case studies. In both instances, I manage the obvious complexity of rebellions and regimes with a logic of predominance. Let us begin with regimes. Classifying authoritarian regimes is a very tricky business, and there is virtually always room for competing interpretations. For instance, Geddes (1999) codes Burma under Ne Win (1962–88) not as strictly military, but as a hybrid ‘military/single-party/personal’ regime. This decision has its merits. Ne Win held a dominant personal position atop his regime, which developed a civilian vehicle as an institutional adjunct to the military: the Burma Socialist People’s Party (BSPP).

Yet while a ruling party may have been present in Burma, it was never anything close to predominant. The BSPP was invented as a cloak for military rule and then discarded, garment-like, when massive protests confirmed the unpopularity of the regime in the late 1980s. The military simply abolished the BSPP in 1988, with no evident political effect. (Geddes rightly codes the regime as purely ‘military’ after 1988.) In short, the BSPP ‘was not supreme. It was hollow: unempowered to operate as a ruling party’ (Yawnghwe 1995: 187).

This raises the questions of whether the categories of civilianized and militarized dictatorships are exhaustive, and how to think about regimes where neither parties nor the military reign palpably supreme. In my previous typological analysis (Slater 2003), authoritarian regimes lacking a party apparatus to help manage and coerce political opposition have been coded, by default, as militarized regimes. To the extent that the lack of a political party forces a dictatorship to rely more heavily on the military for purposes of domestic control, this conceptual shortcut seems defensible. Yet it is still a shortcut. In quantitative analyses such as my co-authored work with Brian Lai (Lai and Slater 2006) as well as that of Jessica Weeks (2014), the stark party–military dichotomy has proven useful for testing average causal effects. In qualitative analyses such as this article, regime militarization can be assessed more directly, and along more of a continuum.

With rebellions as with regime types, I attempt to puncture the problem of complexity and heterogeneity with a logic of predominance. Burma again provides an illustrative example. It would be preposterous to claim that regional and separatist rebellions were the only violent conflicts that shaped Burma’s authoritarian institutions in the decades following World War II. Leaders in Rangoon also confronted a serious Marxist insurgency as well as borderland incursions by the Kuomintang, giving the country one of the most complicated conflict profiles in the postcolonial world (Callahan 2004). The discussion of rebellions to follow cannot serve as a thorough synopsis of these Southeast Asian countries’ complex histories of violence. What they will try to establish is that the predominant form of conflict was either regional/territorial or leftist/ideological in character, and that
the dominant authoritarian institution that arose in turn was either the military or a civilian ruling party.

It is also vital to stress that not all centre-seeking rebellions are leftist or Marxist in character. Stathis Kalyvas and Laia Balcells (2010: 420, 415) offer the helpful categories of ‘traditional guerrilla war’, which aims more to elude than overthrow the central government, and ‘symmetrical nonconventional warfare’, in which an armed faction rather than an ideological movement makes a bid for power. While the former type of conflict predominated before the Cold War, the latter has become ascendant after the Cold War. Neither type is theorized to have systematic regime effects here. For coding purposes, it is also worth noting that when a leftist, centre-seeking rebellion either begins in a particular region or gets pushed back into a particular region (as in the Chinese Communist Party’s ‘Long March’), it does not become a regional rebellion by my definition. Declared intentions to seize the state are as vital as direct violent impact in central areas.

Illustrating the theory: Cold War Southeast Asia

The causal arguments introduced above are best elaborated through four cases of regime militarization and civilianization in Cold War Southeast Asia. Burma is a paradigmatic case of regional rebellions leading to regime militarization; Malaysia and Vietnam are paradigmatic cases of leftist rebellions producing regime civilianization, with Vietnam exemplifying the revolutionary pathway and Malaysia typifying a counterrevolutionary trajectory; Indonesia is a uniquely informative case inasmuch as sequential regional and leftist rebellions induced authoritarian militarization and civilianization in turn.

Before examining these four cases separately, it is important to make several points about the shared regional context in which all four operated. Nowhere in Southeast Asia were rebellions of any macro-political significance before World War II. European colonialism kept a tight lid on organized resistance, so pre-war rebellions remained mostly parochial in character and local in impact. They credibly threatened neither to seize state power nor to exit state space with an eye on establishing alternative states. It would only be with the disruptions caused by Japanese occupation that rebellions of either leftist or regionalist stripe could gather serious steam. I argue that these post-war rebellions planted the seeds for civilianized and militarized authoritarian regimes to rise to power across the region by the 1950s and 1960s.

In the case studies to follow, I will be especially attentive to two plausible alternative explanations for the regime-type outcomes of interest. Firstly, I aim to show that regime type cannot be straightforwardly explained by antecedent institutional development. In other words, militaries and parties did not have any appreciable political advantage or ‘head start’ on the other type before the rebellions in question erupted. Secondly, and in one of the most important advances beyond my earlier work, I explicitly consider whether my argument on rebellions and regimes is endogenous: that is, whether regimes shaped rebellions rather than the other way around. Beyond pinning down the sequencing to show that the rebellions of interest preceded the regime types of interest, I also stress that all four cases were not only vulnerable to powerful leftist rebellions. They all in fact
experienced them, essentially for world-historical (and thus exogenous) reasons under Cold War conditions. This helps me deal with the inferential danger of selection effects, and hence spuriousness, which would be a problem if certain cases were especially prone to both leftist/regional rebellions and civilianized/militarized rule due to some missing variable. Since all four cases experienced leftist rebellions, it seems unlikely that some factor ignored here (e.g. levels of economic development, identity of colonizer) is producing both leftist rebellion and civilianized dictatorship.

Leftist rebellion and revolutionary party rule in Vietnam

The most straightforward way in which civil war can produce authoritarian civilianization is via the outright military victory and subsequent political domination of an insurgent political party. Vietnam is a consummate example. There, the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) served as the vanguard of national resistance to French and Japanese occupiers during World War II before declaring independence on behalf of the Vietnamese people upon Japan’s surrender in August 1945. The next 30 years would see the VCP organizing a fearsome military and popular effort to seize state power from a succession of implacable governing enemies: first the French colonial authorities (1945–54), then the American-backed South Vietnamese state (1954–75). The fact that Vietnam gained reunification as an independent nation-state in 1975 under the leadership of a deeply civilianized single-party authoritarian regime – and remains so led and dominated more than 40 years later – is inexplicable except as a product of the violent VCP-led leftist rebellion that sought first to capture the northern Vietnamese centre of Hanoi, and decades later managed to conquer the southern Vietnamese political centre of Saigon.

It is hard to fathom an authoritarian regime born amid more intense international conflict than Vietnam’s. Combating French, American and South Vietnamese military operations required that the Vietnamese communists conducted full-blown military operations of their own. External aggression cannot be out-policed by civilians or out-organized by the party masses; it must be out-battled by military troops. It is thus remarkable that the civilianizing dynamics of leftist, capital-seizing rebellion ultimately outweighed the expected militarizing effects of intense external warfare. As in other cases of victorious leftist rebellion during the Cold War era such as China, Cuba and North Korea, the organizational vicissitudes of Leninist mobilization ensured that national militaries might enjoy tremendous political influence and access after revolutionary victory was secured, but not authoritarian institutional domination.

The critical point is that party supremacy and control over the military was woven into the very fabric of Vietnam’s revolutionary politics from the outset. This has been the foundation, not of a kind of civilianized politics in which the military becomes a virtual non-actor (as we will see shortly in Malaysia), but of a joint project between party and military in which the latter paradoxically enjoys a major – but subservient – political role. The origins of this arrangement lie in 1941, when the VCP founded the Vietnam People’s Army (VPA), alongside the wider Viet Minh resistance front, to resist both the Japanese occupiers and their Vichy
French collaborators. This military force was essentially inactive during the period of joint Vichy-Japanese rule from 1941 to 1944, but burst into action after France fell to the Allies and Japan seized control over its Indochinese possessions. When the VPA came to life in December 1944, it was midwifed by activist conspiracy rather than military operations, which remained impossible under Japan’s coercive blanket. The army’s founding nature as a civilian vehicle is eloquently captured by the fact that its first leader was not a soldier at all:

Vo Nguyen Giap, a history teacher without any prior military experience, was directed to take charge of military affairs. In July 1944 Giap was ordered to create a mobile force of guerrilla fighters from among his 500 militiamen. On 22 December 1944 thirty-one men and three women grouped into this mobile unit and titled the Vietnam Propaganda and Liberation Army. Henceforth, party historians have marked this date as the founding anniversary of Vietnam’s military forces. (Thayer 1985: 235)

It would be this generation of communist activists who would command Vietnam’s military throughout the long four decades of armed struggle to unify Vietnam under VCP rule. Considering the strongly shared party–military interest in expelling occupiers and reunifying the Vietnamese nation, these decades of conflict cemented the joint project rather than cracking it. Carlyle Thayer explains the supportive position of the VPA’s founding fathers in this arrangement:

Because of their prior VCP membership and experience as professional revolutionaries, they naturally combined political objectives with military operations in the course of developing a Vietnamese brand of people’s war. From the beginning, the military was subordinated to the party... It is unnecessary to describe further organizational changes to illustrate the main point that from its inception Vietnam’s military forces have been under party control both because party revolutionaries became its first general officers and because the military, in structural terms, was placed in a subordinate role to the party. (Thayer 1985: 239–40)

Subordination does not mean irrelevance, however. Much like we will see in Indonesia, the military in Vietnam has long played an active role in rural governance and has never wanted for positions of authority in national politics. Civilianization does not mean demilitarization. Yet the military is emphatically the junior partner in Vietnam’s ‘joint project’ of Leninist party rule. The seeming paradox is that the VPA ‘commands a disproportionate share of government resources and has a powerful voice in policymaking’, even as the VCP unquestionably ‘continues to monopolize political power, asserting that it alone represents the interests of all Vietnamese people’ (Abuza 2001: 2).

This paradox is best resolved by understanding how histories of violence in Vietnam witnessed a party building a national military rather than the other way around. In stark contrast to the militarization cases of Burma and Indonesia, military involvement in Vietnamese politics has always been in tandem with the civilian apparatus that has shared and defined all of its violent struggles. Leftist rebellions against enemies both foreign and domestic fused a hegemonic party and a subordinate military together in Vietnam, while regional rebellions in Burma and
Indonesia splintered party and military in ways that profoundly shaped authoritarian origins.

**Leftist rebellion and counterrevolutionary party rule in Malaysia**

Malaysia’s electoral authoritarian regime has been dominated by the same ruling-party coalition since the country’s independence in 1957. The origins of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) coalition’s political dominance – and the military’s virtual political irrelevance – can be located in the civilian-led response to communist Chinese rebellion in the decade following World War II.

Japan’s sudden surrender in August 1945 left the heavily armed Malayan Communist Party (MCP) as the only organized political force in the peninsula. The MCP exacted revenge upon the majority Malay population throughout late 1945 and early 1946, repaying their rivals for their general attitude of accommodation towards Japan’s occupying forces. In an effort to weaken communist rebel forces, British authorities pressured the colony’s Malay sultans to accept a new constitution granting citizenship to most resident Chinese. Against the backdrop of mass mobilization among the armed forces of Chinese communism, the Malayan Union plan hit the Malay population like political dynamite. Only a concerted Malay response could force the British to rescind their plan. Yet the Malay population lacked mass organizations of any kind, and the Malay elite remained splintered along provincial lines. What emerged in response was the organization that would become Malaysia’s ruling party.

Numerous Malay associations rapidly transcended their particularistic local village and state identities and coalesced against the Malayan Union scheme . . . The oppositionist movement, which culminated in the United Malays National Organization (or UMNO), was led by the elite stratum of Malay administrators. Using their links with district level Malay authorities right down to the Malay headman, the elites succeeded in mobilizing most of the Malay population and, in doing so, laid the basis for UMNO as a mass political party. (Jesudason 1996: 42–3)

The emergence of the MCA three years later was similarly influenced by a deteriorating security situation. ‘The immediate impetus for the formation of the MCA was the outbreak of the Emergency,’ argues Heng Pek Koon. ‘Faced with a militant Communist challenge, Chinese conservative leaders sought to consolidate their position within the community’ (Heng 1988: 54). Since Malay and Chinese civilian elites similarly found themselves in the MCP’s crosshairs, even leading Malays urged Chinese elites to create a new political party. UMNO leader Onn bin Jaafar proclaimed that ‘law-abiding Chinese should band together in a political party to help the government in the fight against Communism . . . to organize themselves and to come in together with us, and we can stamp this danger out’ (cited in Heng 1988: 59). One of the MCA’s co-founders, Tan Cheng Lock, expressed the party’s *raison d’etre* in similar terms: ‘I am perfectly positive that without some such Chinese organization as the MCA as a counter to the MCP, the danger of
communism establishing its rule over Malaya will be increased ten-fold’ (cited in Heng 1988: 130).

Only the shared threat of the MCP can explain the seemingly implausible cross-ethnic collective action undertaken by the Malays, Chinese and British. Party coalescence across ethnic divides was facilitated by British authorities beginning in early 1949, as colonial officials perceived an urgent ‘need to bring the conservative Malay, Chinese and Indian leadership together to confront the MCP insurrection’ (Heng 1988: 147–8). Electoral successes then compounded the incentives for UMNO and MCA leaders to sustain their coalition. Having teamed up to sweep a series of municipal elections in 1952, the two parties joined hands with the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) in creating ‘The Alliance’ in August 1953. This party coalition would win 51 of 52 seats in the national elections of July 1955, paving the way for Britain’s handover of power in August 1957.

Independence required operational as well as electoral success over the powers of leftist insurgency. At first, the counterinsurgency was purely coercive and relatively militarized. When the police were granted authority to lead all emergency operations in October 1948, Malaya’s top military official huffed that ‘it was completely unacceptable for a general to accept orders from a policeman’ (Stubbs 1989: 71). Yet the exigencies of counterinsurgency would inspire a joint project linking civilian and military elites. By early 1950, ‘it was becoming evident that the Government was losing ground to the MCP’, prompting colonial officials to create a new post of director of operations ‘to co-ordinate the activities of the police and the military’ for the first time, under civilian command (Stubbs 1989: 98). The second director of operations, Gerald Templer, was empowered to serve simultaneously as High Commissioner. Given the chronic unmanageability of MCP insurgency, elites from all groups welcomed the concentration of power in this new ‘civil–military supremo’ (White 1996: 123). After Templer’s first address to Malaya’s Legislative Council, UMNO leader Onn reported, ‘what he was really saying was: “If anyone gets in my way he’ll be trod on.”’ Onn noted that this approach is ‘exactly what we need’ (Stubbs 1989: 144). This broad and resolute elite support helped Templer assert civilian supremacy while meeting military officers’ demands for robust operational support. Meanwhile, aggressive recruitment made the Malayan police grow ‘from around 11,000 (1948) to over 73,000 (1952 peak)’ (Hack 1999: 8). Templer received widespread elite support for his call to build new civilian institutions capable of winning the hearts and minds of potential recruits to the communist cause.

Analysts differ over whether Malaysia should be coded as an authoritarian regime since gaining independence in 1957, or only after racial riots in the nation’s capital once again brought ethnic Chinese leftists unacceptably close to the pinnacle of state power in 1969. By either reckoning, UMNO established party domination over the polity by the 1950s in direct response to leftist rebellion, and has commanded a civilianized authoritarian regime for half a century. Unlike the military institutions that emerged in the wake of regional rebellions to dominate Burma, or the revolutionary party that seized authoritarian powers in Vietnam, counterrevolutionary party institutions arose in response to a power-seeking leftist insurgency to command the polity in Malaysia.
Regional rebellion and military rule in Burma

Virtually all newly independent and outgoing colonial governments in Southeast Asia confronted powerful leftist rebellions in the years immediately following Japan’s wartime occupation of the region. This was due to Allied support for leftist anti-Japanese resistance movements during the war, which spilled over to Chinese and Soviet support for leftist insurrections as the Cold War began. But in Burma, the greatest threats in the wake of Britain’s handover of sovereignty in January 1948 were regional insurgencies. Whereas anti-Japanese mobilization transformed into post-war communist rebellion in Malaysia, those rebellious energies were mostly channelled into anti-British protest through the vehicle of a nationalist party, the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL), in Burma. Once independence was gained, leftists had a central place in government. The insurgent Communist Party of Burma (CPB) became more of a nuisance than an existential threat to Burmese elites in either the cities or countryside.

Among the multiple regional rebellions the newborn Burmese state confronted, especially impactful was the Karen National Union (KNU) and its military wing, the Karen National Defence Organization (KNDO). It has always been more concerned with the ethnic right of self determination than with the overthrow of the government in Rangoon, writes Martin Smith. ‘But this is not to underestimate the considerable challenge the KNU continued to pose. Of all the insurgent movements his government faced, [Burma’s first prime minister] U Nu described the KNU as the most “formidable” (Smith 1991: 137). Yet by threatening Burma’s territorial integrity more than the property rights or personal safety of Burma’s civilian elites, this separatist rebellion did not exhibit any unifying effect beyond the military itself (or tatmadaw).

An important alternative explanation locates the origins of Burma’s militarized polity in World War II, when Japan mobilized the Burma National Army (BNA), the predecessor to the tatmadaw. Yet this hypothesis encounters immediate difficulties. The mere existence of a military explains neither the internal cohesion nor the civilian friction necessary to produce thoroughgoing militarization. Both were plainly absent before the Karen insurgency erupted. In terms of cohesion, the post-war military was a ‘two-wing’ creature, divided between an ethnically Burman-dominated BNA wing and the Karen-dominated remnants of the British pre-war service. As for friction with civilians, Burma gained independence under the leadership of a vanguard nationalist party, the AFPFL. It was by no means clear that a military apparatus would supersede the power of the AFPFL, or that civilian-military tensions would become so endemic in Burmese politics.

The Karen insurgency would only briefly inspire a defensive joint project across the military-civilian divide in late 1948 and early 1949, when it came perilously close to Rangoon. Prime Minister U Nu responded by giving General Ne Win total control over the state’s beleaguered coercive institutions, naming him ‘Supreme Commander of All Defence Forces and Police Forces’. All high-ranking Karen officers were purged, prompting massive defections among the rank and file, but also solidifying ethnic Burman control over the tatmadaw. The reinvigorated, Burman-dominated coercive apparatus ousted Karen rebels from all their urban strongholds between early 1949 and early 1950 (Smith 1991: 139–40).
*tatmadaw*’s reorganization and successful field campaigns produced a more unified coercive apparatus, and endemic separatist violence along Burma’s vast and ungoverned frontiers would motivate *tatmadaw* leaders to privilege their own institutional and political interests, even without broader elite support. ‘The Burma army experienced a veritable explosion of institution building in the mid-1950s’, while ‘improvements in civilian bureaucratic capacities did not keep pace with the transformation of the army’ (Callahan 2004: 175, 18).

Regional rebellions would provide the impetus for the *tatmadaw* not just to revamp its segments of the state, but to assume control of the regime. ‘In 1958,’ writes Jalal Alamgir, ‘at the request of Prime Minister U Nu, the military chief General Ne Win temporarily took over power to suppress minority insurgency and restore order so that national elections could be held in 1960’ (Alamgir 1997: 338). While U Nu’s AFPFL reeled from a major split, ‘the army wasted no time in shuffling officers into every major ministry and department of the government’ (Callahan 2004: 191). Although the 1958–60 period was officially a time of caretaker military rule, the generals’ will to power was unmistakable. ‘The *tatmadaw*’s reading of Burma’s first decade of postcolonial rule was that elected political leaders could not be trusted with holding the Union together’ (Callahan 2004: 190).

This view was far from universally shared, however. When Ne Win presided over a democratic national election in 1960, the results did not show broad popular support for military involvement in politics. The military-backed party was defeated by the new party vehicle of its nemesis, U Nu, who secured victory by extolling the virtues of Buddhist piety, not territorial integrity. Yet continuing separatist unrest made Ne Win confident that he could generate unified military support for another coup: ‘a military takeover, he argued, was the only way to prevent Burma from disintegrating’, writes Alamgir. ‘National unity was posed as the foremost problem facing multiethnic Burma. And it was not just sheer rhetoric – it did have a plausible ring of truth to it’ (Alamgir 1997: 339).

It would of course be naïve to suggest that Ne Win’s ‘definitive coup of March 1962’ was motivated entirely by concerns with separatist rebellions (Callahan 2004: 202). From a comparative perspective, however, the critical point is that such shared operational concerns helped maintain the *tatmadaw*’s cohesion as it seized political power – a move that typically splits soldiers into political and professional wings. Since the coup took place without significant societal backing, cohesion within the military itself was of exceeding importance. And indeed, ‘[t]his was a coup that bore the stamp of a unified, bureaucratized military,’ observes Mary Callahan. ‘This unity may well explain why this coup brought civilian rule to such a definitive end’ (Callahan 2004: 203), and did not represent the kind of ‘guardian’ coup in which a military seizes but does not cling to power.

### Sequential rebellions and party–military hybridity in Indonesia

Like Vietnam, Indonesia had to fight a bloody war of independence against returning European colonialists after Japan’s surrender in August 1945. By 1949, the Dutch had been expelled. Yet no single vanguard party like the VCP commanded the new Indonesian republic’s political heights. Anti-Dutch icon
Sukarno’s Indonesian Nationalist Party (PNI) competed with the party vehicles of the world’s two largest Islamic organizations, the Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), as well as the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), for civilian leadership. Meanwhile the Japanese-founded national military, ABRI, watched democratic party competition function – and increasingly malfunction – throughout the 1950s with growing trepidation.

This extreme political pluralism and indeterminacy would eventually be resolved, more than any other factor, by the emergence of both regionalist and leftist rebellions. But whereas Burma combated regional rebellions that were substantially stronger than their leftist counterparts, Indonesia experienced its two types of rebellion *sequentially*. Regional rebellions erupted first in the late 1950s, producing the same sort (if of a lesser severity) of regime militarization witnessed in Burma. The leftist PKI would make a dramatic bid to seize national power a bit later, in the early to mid-1960s. Though the military would not entirely yield its infrastructural position to a ruling party, the right-wing anti-PKI coup of 1965 gained widespread support among civilian elites, fostering party-building and a partial civilianization of authoritarian power.

As in Burma, the national military in Indonesia originated under Japanese auspices. Yet again, this explains neither the eventual cohesion of the Indonesian military nor its historically uneven relations with civilian elites. Neither ideological nor institutional cohesion was much in evidence within ABRI before the outbreak of regional rebellions in the late 1950s. Aside from chronic ‘competition between the three services, the army, navy and air force’ (Kingsbury 2003: 141), the army itself was plagued by deep factional, ideological and territorial divisions. Efforts by ABRI leaders to reorganize the splintered guerilla units of the national revolution into a more centralized fighting force in the early to mid-1950s were consistently thwarted by unsympathetic civilian leaders.

Regional rebellions (à la Burma) would disrupt this equilibrium before leftist rebellion (à la Malaysia). The PKI came in fourth place in the national elections of 1955, and was successfully ‘domesticated’ by the practice of electoral politics (Anderson 1996: 29). Conversely, the tendency of elections to strengthen Java-based parties inflamed regionalist sentiment, sparking rebellions in West Sumatra and North Sulawesi in February 1958. Unlike separatist insurgencies in Burma, these regional rebellions mobilized demands for territorial autonomy rather than outright separation, and did so with relatively minor recourse to violence. Nevertheless, these rebellions served as a spur for collective action within ABRI itself and strengthened the position of Indonesian generals vis-à-vis civilian politicians. Peripheral conflict inspired ABRI leader A.H. Nasution to elaborate the concept of *dwifungsi*, or dual function, which would be used to justify the military’s active political role throughout Suharto’s New Order. The regionalist mutinies also provided an impetus for the purging of military elites from ethnic minority groups, creating a more sociologically cohesive set of top generals. ‘After the 1958 rebellion, the Javanese element in the army leadership became absolutely dominant’ (Utrecht 1972: 60).

Regional rebellions produced quick institutional repercussions. ‘The rebellion in the Outer Islands offered the long-awaited opportunity to commence a new reorganization and rationalization plan’ (Utrecht 1972: 60). Whereas Sukarno had
ixed such efforts in 1952 and 1955, the regional rebellions had definitively shifted the political landscape. Since ABRI had quashed the unrest, and non-Javanese parliamentarians had been blamed in part for instigating it, Sukarno became much more beholden to a military that was ‘far stronger and more united’ than before the rebellions erupted (Feith and Lev 1963: 46). Militarization accelerated with Sukarno’s declaration of Guided Democracy (1959–65), as ‘military occupation of the bureaucracy also increased’ (Emmerson 1978: 88). Ernst Utrecht (1972: 61) goes so far as to call the transition to Guided Democracy a ‘partial military take-over’. Regional rebellions thus helped ABRI overcome many of its internal divisions and position itself at the heart of the Indonesian polity by the late 1950s.

The meteoric rise of the PKI during the early to mid-1960s would have quite different institutional consequences. As a leftist party mobilizing revolutionary redistributive demands and transgressive, violent mass actions both in cities and the countryside (Roosa 2006), the PKI’s rise forged a coalition of interests among anti-communist elites transcending the civilian–military divide. Hence when a bloody coup apparently led by pro-PKI elements in the military was crushed by anti-communist officers led by General Suharto in 1965, a much stronger basis for a civilian–military alliance existed than in Burma in 1962. Even though the PKI never built or sustained a leftist insurgency like the MCP had in Malaysia, it came much closer to seizing national power through irregular and violent means. This unified conservative military and civilian elites in a counterrevolutionary joint project broadly mirroring Malaysia’s after the ethnic riots of 1969. ‘The New Order regime did not come about through a simple military coup’, argues Edward Aspinall. ‘Rather, it was brought into being by a coalition which, although it had the army at its core, also drew on significant social support’ (Aspinall 2005: 215–16).

Yet the sequence in which regional and leftist rebellions had erupted would be of enormous consequence for authoritarian regime type. Having become hegemonic in the late 1950s, military elites proved resistant to the construction of autonomous party institutions. Rather than working through an existing party or creating a party from scratch, the Suharto regime retooled a diverse assortment of preexisting ‘corporatist groups’ (or Golkar) into what ‘in effect [became] the army’s political party’ (Boileau 1983: 44). Indonesia’s New Order thus exhibited lower levels of militarization and relied more heavily on civilian institutions and support than Burma’s tatmadaw regime. Yet it was far more militarized and enjoyed less effectively organized civilian support than party-dominant regimes such as Malaysia and Vietnam. In short, it was a hybrid military–party authoritarian regime. Through its sequential rebellions and hybrid authoritarian structure, Indonesia offers extraordinary insight as to how variation in types of violence can shape resultant authoritarian institutions.

Conclusion

Authoritarian regimes are institutions that refuse to renounce the use of violence against their political opponents. It thus stands to reason that their institutional variation has its origins in varied forms of political violence. Regional rebellions should be systematically more likely than other types of wars to give rise to military-dominated authoritarian regimes. Since leftist rebellions aim to seize the
state rather than escape it, and fundamentally reorganize the economy after doing so, such conflicts are much more likely than regional rebellions to encourage joint projects between civilian and military elites – whether through revolutionary collective offence or counterrevolutionary collective self-defence. This mitigates pressure on the military to rule directly rather than accept the leadership of party politicians.

Moving forward, research on the violent origins of authoritarian variation should proceed by determining whether the causal mechanisms posited here are observably in effect across a diverse array of cases. It will be of particular interest to examine negative cases to assess why regional rebellions sometimes do not give rise to regime militarization, and why leftist rebellions sometimes fail to foster regime civilianization. Of particular interest here are joint projects. To the extent that we can identify such coalescence behind a strategy for combating a regional rebellion, we would find support for my argument on the mechanisms of militarization, even as such cases weaken my probabilistic claim that regional rebellions are less conducive to joint projects than other conflict types. The same can be said of instances when leftist rebellions failed politically to generate both joint projects and regime civilianization.

Future research should also carefully attend to sequencing effects and world-regional heterogeneity. The status of Latin America as a region especially prone to regime militarization during the Cold War, despite that region’s apparent paucity of regional rebellions, is of special interest here. As we saw in Indonesia, once authoritarian rule has taken on a militarized cast, a ceiling can be placed on future civilianization initiatives. The fact that most of Latin America had more than a century of militarized authoritarianism under its belt before the Cold War began puts it in a different category from Asia, Africa or the Middle East. The deeper point is that comparativists should be attentive to how histories of violence shape the development of militaries and parties as political institutions in their own right, and not only as commanding institutions in authoritarian regimes.

This theoretical framework will potentially help illuminate coalitional processes and institutional outcomes not only beyond Southeast Asia, but beyond the Cold War as well. Yet here, extra caution is essential. Besides the waning of leftist rebellions, the post-Cold War world has been much less friendly to militarized authoritarianism, attenuating the causal effect of regional rebellions on regime militarization. The contemporary cases of Algeria and Egypt also raise the urgent question of whether coups to defeat Islamists might systematically produce different authoritarian institutions rather than coups to bridle leftists or separatists.

Obviously much more research is needed on the multiple macro-political effects of rebellions as well as the multiple factors shaping authoritarian regime types. The highly targeted emphasis on rebellions’ effects on regimes offered here could help inspire the development of much richer multi-causal arguments. We have much more to learn, not only about why the contemporary world suffers so much authoritarianism, but why it experiences the types of authoritarianism it does in the places it does.

Notes
1 See Geddes (1999), Slater (2003), Cheibub et al. (2010), Wahman et al. (2013) and Geddes et al. (2014). For a critique of typologies and an argument for coding authoritarian regimes with continuous variables instead, see Svolik (2012).
2 Huang (2016) represents a major step forward in theorizing the regime effects of violent conflicts, but the variation of interest for her is in levels of mobilization rather than any variation in the violence itself.

3 These categories are clearly not exhaustive of all types of violence, but they do capture virtually all rebellions, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines more specifically as ‘an act of armed resistance to a government or leader’.

4 These are clearly not the only types of elites who are relevant to regime outcomes (see Slater (2010) on economic elites and communal elites, for example), but they are the only types who can rule.

5 The claim here is not that rebellions produce authoritarian onset, but that different types of rebellion produce different types of authoritarianism.

6 On why the insurgent Communist Party of Burma (CPB) failed to produce counterrevolutionary coalitional effects in this time period, see Slater (2010: 265–8).

References


