

Popular Contentions within and without the Authoritarian Legitimacy: The Case of Taiwan in the
1980s

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Abstract:

Alfred Stepan reminds us of the pivotal question for democratization: how the gap between collective actions in the civil sphere and the organized opposition in the political sphere can be bridged? However, this inquiry into the political orientation of collective actions has been largely overlooked in the context of the shift in political sociology towards a narrow focus on mobilization processes. This paper re-examines the dynamics of popular contention by re-centering the analytical process on authoritarian state legitimation. Contrary to the conventional repression-resistance framework, I highlight the importance to distinguish popular contentions within and without the authoritarian legitimacy and their divergent consequences on authoritarian rule. An authoritarian regime does need to legitimize power by providing quality governance that ordinary citizens really value. Consequently, the credibility of a revolutionary threat posed by popular contentions is contingent upon the robustness of the authoritarian state's responsiveness. An authoritarian state with robust performance legitimation addresses the grievances of ordinary

citizens with respect to the quality of governance, thereby reducing the appeal and eliminating the social foundation of a credible subversion attempt.

The paper supports its argument with episode analysis on the 1988 farmer protest which was a largely neglected critical juncture in the history of Taiwan's democratization. The farmer protest occurred at the climax of popular contention during the political liberation. Moreover, it was the sole island-wide collective action since the 2.28 Incident. The radical opposition regarded such island-wide organizational resources as a rare political opportunity, with the existing mobilization vehicle providing a means of inciting political violence against the "émigré" ROC regime. However, the KMT's constructive engagement with farmers' welfare concerns undermined the radical opposition's ability to mobilize them as a basis for a revolutionary challenge to Taiwan's political status. The radical opposition was even subjected to a boycott by ordinary farmers and the moderate opposition. The failure of the subversive attempt led the opposition camp to recognize that participating in the political process through the electoral process represented the only path forward. Nevertheless, similar to loyal oppositions in other countries, electoral pressure was far from sufficient to compel the regime to transit as it did not contain any credible revolutionary threat.

This finding challenges the prevailing narrative that the confrontation between Taiwanese local society and the "émigré" ROC regime was a primary driver of democratization. It also disenchant the romanticized notion of popular contention as a driving force in regime change, as espoused in mobilization studies. Such an illusion ignores the significant impact of political orientation toward authoritarian regime legitimacy on the political consequences of collective actions. Furthermore, this paper makes implications for future research on authoritarian-led democratization. The path to authoritarian-led democratization within well-governed regimes

may be contingent upon the existence of a consensus between authoritarian legitimacy and society's contentious claims regarding the extension of political participation. A liberal-democratic constitution is more likely to facilitate the formation of such a consensus, whereas robust performance legitimacy may serve to mitigate the appeal of radical action, thereby enabling the state to tolerate electoral pressure from moderate opposition.