

Discursive Opportunities and the Mobilization of Pro-Democracy Movements: Myanmar and China in the Late 1980s

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Abstract

Analyzing opportunity structures accessible to social movements provides a compelling framework in explaining how protest movements mobilize and achieve their objectives in nondemocratic regimes. This study focuses on the role of discursive opportunity structures—“the aspects of public discourse that determine a message’s chances of diffusion in the public sphere” (Koopmans and Olzak 2004, 202)—in mobilizing protest movements and determining their success (or otherwise). By comparing Myanmar’s 8888 People’s Democracy Movement (1988) and China’s Tiananmen Democracy Movement (1989), I show that the latter maximized discursive opportunities; the visibility of its claims was high, its framing resonated with the Chinese citizenry, and it had broad support across regions and social classes. The Burmese movement, on the contrary, did not develop, have, or take full advantage of discursive opportunities; they made their claims visible only for a time, and failed to engage the citizens deeply to sustain collective action and to broaden their legitimacy and support.

Key words: China, discursive opportunities, Myanmar, non-democratic regimes, protest movements, social movements, Tiananmen Democracy Movement

Introduction

Protest movements are highly unlikely to emerge in autocratic regimes since they are characterized by relatively closed polities, persecution of regime challengers, and controlled media (Ackerman and Kruegler 1994; Schock 1999, 2005; Corduneanu-Huci and Osa 2003). The propensity of the regime to utilize repression and violence increases the risk, and decreases the likelihood, of protest mobilization and participation (Brockett 1995; Zuo and Benford 1995). However, recent studies (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014; Kim 2016) show that mass uprisings demanding political change do challenge the survival of authoritarian governments. For instance, people power movements, employing nonviolent action (Ackerman and Kruegler 1994; Schock 2005), have prompted democratic regime transitions, particularly in the Third World. Sustained protests in nondemocracies can depose autocrats and overthrow the authoritarian state itself, which implies that discontent with the ruling order emanate from repressive environments (Teorell 2010).

Protest movements emerge and mobilize because of *opportunities* or *opportunity structures*, as they are collectively known in social movement research. Opportunity structures generally refer to a configuration of factors conducive to mobilization (Tarrow 1996, 1998), but they specifically entail a cluster of causes that can motivate people to engage in collective action. Opportunities facilitate not only the emergence of the movement but also their subsequent development and likelihood of success.

The social movement literature has given considerable attention to political opportunities, whose prominence arguably dates back from Charles Tilly's (1978) foundational work; he would later expand it with his colleagues, Doug McAdam and Sidney Tarrow (2001). Political opportunities are the "dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to engage in collective action" (Osa and Schock 2007, 124). While immensely valuable, political opportunities are sometimes insufficient to explain mobilization and its outcomes. Recent studies (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Ferree 2003; Goodwin and Jasper 2004;

Bröer and Duyvendak 2009; Koopmans and Muis 2009; Amenta and Halfmann 2012) suggest that political opportunities lose their utility if their public visibility is limited, if not nonexistent; or if the claims of movements strike people as immaterial, resulting in the people's failure to act upon these opportunities.

The discursive opportunity theory, building on the work of Koopmans and Olzak (2004), presents a more novel and encompassing approach in explaining mobilization; it also takes into account of the agency of actors that the heavily structural political opportunities framework glosses over (Benford and Snow 2000). Discursive opportunities bridge the gap between the agents of the movement and the structures that constrain and enable their actions. "Opportunities and threats are not objective categories...but also involve members of the polity and subjects as well as other challengers" (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 45).

This article shows how such discursive opportunity structures—the nature of and extent of a movement's claims and discourses—influence the processes and outcomes of protest mobilization in nondemocratic regimes. Surveying and situating itself in the broader literature, it employs a comparative analysis of two Asian protest movements—China's and Myanmar's—that emerged from a nondemocratic context in the late 1980s, and shows the differences in how and to what extent each movement had, created, and/or maximized discursive opportunities in their protests against the state.

Discursive Opportunities in Protest Movements

Discursive opportunities refer to "the aspects of public discourse that determine a message's chances of diffusion in the public sphere" (Koopmans and Olzak 2004, 202). The public sphere acts as an arena where protest movements can make their objectives known to potential participants and convince them of the salience of their issues and causes (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988; McCarthy, Smith and Zald 1996; Koopmans and Olzak 2004; Bröer and Duyvendak 2009).

The study of discursive opportunities covers a broad approach. Aside from explaining the diffusion of a movement's discourse, it also synthesizes social movement framing theory and the political process theory (Ferre 2002; Koopmans and Olzak 2004; McCammon, Newman, Muse, and Terrell 2007). It sheds light on how movements in nondemocracies can overcome restraints to disseminate their claims and propagate discourse (Zuo and Benford 1995). While the political opportunity theory views social movements as mere "carriers of extant ideas and meanings that grow automatically out of structural arrangements," the discursive opportunity framework considers social movements as "signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists and bystanders for observers" (Benford and Snow 2000, 613). Through such opportunities, people become aware of structurally given political possibilities, which arise on the basis of information and public visibility (Koopmans and Muis 2009). As such, a focus on discourse deviates from, but also complements, the unidimensional emphasis on the political realm, and acknowledges the role of meaning-making. Indeed, without discursive opportunities, structural factors such as political space remain meaningless (Koopmans and Muis 2009).

Core dimensions of discursive opportunity structures

Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham (in McCammon, Newman, Muse, and Terrell 2007, 731) first introduced the concept of discursive opportunities as mechanisms "to identify ideas in the larger political culture that are believed to be 'sensible,' 'realistic,' and 'legitimate' and that facilitate the reception of certain movement frames." According to Koopmans and Statham, three (3) elements are of great significance in this process: visibility, resonance, and legitimacy.

Visibility refers to the extent to which people become aware of a movement and its activities (Walgrave and Manssens 2000; Koopmans and Olzak 2004). Visibility for protest movements is important, as "regime weaknesses and openings that do not become publicly visible may be

considered ‘non-opportunities,’ which for all practical purposes might as well not exist at all” (Koopmans and Muis 2009, 648). A message must be visible if the movement’s objective is to “influence the public discourse” (Koopmans and Olzak 2004, 203). A study of the 1996 White March mobilization in Brussels, Belgium conclude that mass media is an influential factor in protest visibility (Walgrave and Manssens 2000). At the same time, the effectiveness of mass media in influencing the outcomes of protest movements is premised on the notion that the public is not a passive consumer of news. Indeed, engaging with “media imagery” is an “active process” (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, and Sasson 1992, 375).

The internet and social media have also created new avenues for visibility; they now allow social movements to communicate their messages easier and faster, to circumvent media gatekeepers in the process, and thus provide relatively unmediated access to the general public (Molaei 2015; Owen 2016; Neumayer and Rossi 2018). For instance, during the closing years of Suharto’s dictatorship in Indonesia, anti-Suharto movements created online chat and email news groups to disseminate information, both locally and internationally (Hill and Sen 2000). Social media networks have also been found crucial in the visibility of Indonesian anti-corruption advocacies (Molaei 2015).

Resonance refers to the act of “provoking reactions from other actors in the public sphere” (Koopmans and Olzak 2004, 205). It enhances the capacity of a message to elicit reactions from mobilization targets (i.e. the public) and other actors. Furthermore, resonance is relevant “to...the effectiveness or mobilizing potency of proffered framings, thereby attending to the question of why some framings seem to be effective or ‘resonate’ while others do not” (Benford and Snow 2000, 619). Resonance comes in two forms: consonance and dissonance (Koopmans and Olzak 2004). Consonance occurs when individuals accept or support the movement’s message and demands; it exemplifies the movement’s relevance to a certain segment of population. Dissonance happens when people reject the claims articulated by the movement or when individuals fail to buy in to the message. A high degree of resonance is achieved when two factors—

concerning the movement's claims and narratives—are met: empirical credibility and experiential commensurability (Snow and Benford 1988). The former ensures that the claims of the movement have a material and factual basis, while the latter entails the congruity of the claims with the public's personal and day-to-day experiences.

Legitimacy refers to the degree of support that other actors in the public sphere—classes, organizations, groups, etc.—accord to the message of the claim-makers (Koopmans and Olzak 2004), i.e. the protesters. The more public support is drawn from various sectors and social bases, the greater the movement's legitimacy. In essence, high resonance goes hand-in-hand with high legitimacy, but it could also be the opposite. “Highly legitimate messages may have no resonance at all because they are uncontroversial, while highly illegitimate messages may have strong resonance” (Koopmans and Olzak 2004, 205). In Zuo and Benford's (1995) study, the high resonance of the claims by Tiananmen pro-democracy movement extensively mobilized citizens from various sectors: not only those of Beijing but also those from neighboring cities and provinces (Tong 1998).

Methodology

I conducted a thorough survey of literature on people power and protest movements (Huntington 1991; Zunes 1994; Goodwin 2001; Corduneanu-Huci and Osa 2003; Schock 2005; Slater 2010; Katsiaficas 2013) and considered certain criteria to determine the case studies: 1988 People's Democracy Movement in Myanmar and the 1989 Tiananmen Democracy Movement in China.

First, the movements should have emanated from Asia. The first criterion seeks to address the lack of Asian case studies in the protest movement literature. Katsiaficas (2013) laments what has elsewhere been “Western bias of social movement theory, particularly the political process framework” (Corduneanu-Huci and Osa 2003, 273), which renders Asia largely invisible in the empirical literature. Secondly, the movement should

have emerged from a nondemocratic context. Much of the literature on opportunity structures vis-à-vis social movements concern collective action in liberal democratic contexts (Dalton and Keuchler 1990; Koopmans and Statham 1999; Meyer and Minkoff 2004; Hooghe 2005). However, discursive opportunities are more vital to emergent movements, and are more likely to precipitate mobilization, especially in nondemocratic contexts. Lastly, the movement should have occurred from the 1970s to 1990s, an era dubbed as “the third wave of democratization,” which saw a surge of democratic transitions in Asia and the Third World (Huntington 1991). In this respect, this study contributes to the literature on democratization by focusing on the host of conditions that shows if, how and to what extent available opportunities facilitate mobilization in nondemocratic contexts (Osa and Schock 2007).

Although the opportunities framework has been employed to explain the mobilization processes and outcomes of the Burmese and Chinese movements, most studies focus on political opportunities (Smith and Pagnucco 1992; Schock 1999, 2005; Corduneanu-Huci and Osa 2003; Osa and Schock 2007). This study in contrast relies on a discursive opportunities framework to develop an alternative and more nuanced approach to how both movements emerged, mobilized, and achieved (or otherwise) their outcomes.

Dimensions and indicators of discursive opportunities

In specifying the dimensions of discursive opportunities, I draw upon the empirical and theoretical literature in the preceding section. To identify and operationalize the indicator/s for all the dimensions, I used multiple references to ensure the validity of their operationalization (Yin 2009). Table 1 summarizes the measures for the dimensions of discursive opportunities.

Table 1: Operationalization of the dimensions of discursive opportunities

| Dimension | Operationalization | Bases |
|------------|---|---|
| Visibility | Access to media (alternative/underground/independent) and information flows (print, media, broadcast, and/or personal networks) | Walgrave and Manssens (2000); Koopmans and Olzak (2004); Koopmans and Muis (2009) |
| Resonance | Expression of claims (written or oral) or performative actions (e.g. hunger strike, lightning protest) that contain empirical credibility and experiential commensurability | Snow and Benford (1988); Zuo and Benford (1995); Benford and Snow (2000); Koopmans and Olzak (2004) |
| Legitimacy | Participation of actors from a broader social base; diffusion of participation beyond the city/region of the movement's origin | Koopmans and Olzak (2004) |

Data sources

This paper uses multiple data sources to triangulate the information and help ensure a holistic analysis. Since the secondary references did not necessarily employ the discursive opportunities framework, the study reframes them as part of its argument. Also, I included materials written by local (Chinese and Burmese) authors and scholars to provide first-hand, *authentic voices*.¹ I used the following in this study: primary sources, which include personal accounts and autobiographies of those who participated or were involved in the movement, as well as interviews of participants cited in the secondary literature; secondary sources, which primarily consists of case studies and area; local and foreign newspaper articles, clippings, and entries (taken from the LexisNexis Academic database); archival records such as government memoranda and minutes of party meetings and congressional sessions.

I conducted a thematic analysis of the pertinent information and read the sources to extract patterned meanings and overarching themes. In generating codes and labels for the data as well as in developing themes, I employed the deductive method (Crabtree and Miller 1999; Fereday

and Muir-Cochrane 2006), since the study already has a *a priori* template codes to focus on, i.e. the three dimensions of discursive opportunities specified above. I collected the data for each code and examined them to identify broader themes relevant to the codes. I wove the generated themes and data extracts together and situated them in the existing literature to form an analytic narrative.

Discursive Opportunity Structures: A Comparison Between Myanmar and China

The emergence of the 8888 People's Democracy Movement in Myanmar (formerly Burma) traces its origins to the events of March 1962, particularly the rise of General Ne Win as the head of a military dictatorship (Yitri 1989; Maung 1990; Taylor 1991; Schock 1999). Claiming that the state was veering away from its socialist foundations, Ne Win led a coup against U Nu's democratic government (Maung 1990; Schock 1999). Over the course of Ne Win's regime, the role of the *tatmadaw* (Burmese armed forces) in politics increased, and demonstrations, albeit minimal and intermittent, started to gain traction. By 1988, antiregime protests became ubiquitous. "In March" that year, "students from the Rangoon Institute of Technology (RIT) protested the killing of fellow university students by the *Lon Htein*, or riot police force" (Schock 1999, 359). Months later, students organized a more widespread rally, which was violently dispersed by the police and the army, causing the deaths and arrests of many dissidents (Burma Watcher 1989).

In response to the growing discontent, the Burma State Socialist Party (BSSP) held a congressional session in July, where "Ne Win announced that he would step down as the president and chair of the BSSP" (Stephan and Chenoweth 2008, 37–38). He also proposed a referendum to gauge public sentiment on the adoption of a multiparty system, which was subsequently rejected by the congress. The "rejection of the proposal and the appointment of Sein Lwin," the notorious leader

of the *Lon Htein* as the new president and chair of the BSSP, “led to a new and intensified round of anti-regime protests” (Maung 1990; Schock 1999, 359). A pro-democracy demonstration was organized on 8 August 1988 (8/8/88), which again was violently suppressed by state troops (Schock 2005). The protests escalated in the following weeks, calling for the end of one-party rule and the establishment of democracy. As the country verged into lawlessness, a group of generals led by former party leader Ne Win and general Saw Maung orchestrated a *sui coup*² to form the State Law and Order Restoration Committee (SLORC). The SLORC sought to address the social chaos that had engulfed the country (Guyot 1989). Now with full power, it declared martial law and brutally suppressed all opposition, culminating in the movement’s collapse.

In the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the laggard pace of political reform, and the death of Hu Yaobang—former general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) who was most supportive of political reform in the party elite—were vital to the emergence of the Tiananmen Democracy Movement in 1989 (Smith and Pagnucco 1992; Zhao 2001). Adversely affected by the country’s deepening economic crisis, university students and public intellectuals called for the end of corruption, greater freedom for the press, and increase in education funding (McCormick et al. 1992; Smith and Pagnucco 1992). Despite the publication of the ominous *People’s Daily* editorial on 26 April 1989, where the government implicitly threatened to use force against the protesters if they continued (Nathan 2001), antiregime demonstrations were held at Tiananmen Square, the symbolic center of Chinese communist politics. The protesters thought that “economic reform without substantial political reform was contradictory and democratization was the solution to China’s problems” (Schock 2005, 99). During Hu’s state funeral, some students from Beijing-based universities attempted to hold a dialogue with Premier Li Peng; but the dialogue did not push through.

After Mikhail Gorbachev’s state visit to China as part of the Sino-Soviet summit, the communist party declared martial law on 20 May 1989. Military troops entered Beijing, but protesters, along with Beijing residents,

blocked them from the Square. The government, seeking to put an end to the mounting dissent, cracked down on the demonstrations (Liang et al. 2001). On the evening of 3 June, military troops advanced to the Square. At dawn of 4 June, the soldiers opened fire, and by morning, the Square had been cleared. The number of casualties has been contested even up to this day. The Chinese government claimed that 241 people, including soldiers, were killed, and around 7,000 people were injured (McKenna 2020) but estimates of the death toll from other sources are higher, from 1,000 to 10,000 (Schock 2005; Lusher 2017).

Economic crisis may have influenced the growing discontent among Burmese and Chinese citizens, but in itself, the emergence of discontent in the public does not presuppose, and does not automatically lead to, the formation of protest movements. Following Kuran (1991), protest movements must also alter widely held conceptions regarding the incumbent regime and encourage people to join the revolutionary bandwagon.

Ample evidence suggests that the discursive opportunities available for the Tiananmen Movement were favorable for mobilization. The movement successfully made their claims visible to, and resonant with, the greater public. Legitimacy was evident in the increase in its membership and in its diffusion beyond Beijing and across China in a relatively short amount of time. This is the exact opposite of what happened in Burma, where the weak presence of discursive opportunity structures was characterized by low resonance of the movement's claims and low legitimacy; the movement failed to garner support from broader social bases, despite achieving high visibility of its claims and demands.

Visibility of the movements' claims and narratives

Alternative sources of media helped raise the visibility of messages and claims of the Tiananmen movement, since major broadcast and print media outlets had been heavily subjected to state control. After the CCP

published the infamous 26 April *People's Daily* editorial that criticized the students, the government's control of local mass media weakened, particularly from 28 April to 13 May 1989; more journalists joined the protests and called for an objective coverage of the demonstrations (Schock 2005). Before the declaration of martial law reinstated censorship, journalists could publish pro-student accounts (Zhao 2001). While the foreign media such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Voice of America (VOA) provided extensive coverage (Dittmer 1990; Mark 1991; Zuo and Benford 1995), they did not assume a significant role in raising the visibility of the movement because

Western journalists' general lack of a deep cultural knowledge of China led their coverage to center more on iconic symbols and slogans, stars of the movement, unconfirmed rumors, and human interest stories than on the movement's internal dynamics. (Zhao 2001, 305)

The public, not least the protesters and citizens, regarded alternative media and informal channels as more effective. Some students used *dazibao*³ (large character posters), posting them on bulletin boards, building walls, and other conspicuous areas around the campuses (Meisner 1999; Cunningham 2009). Residents in university dorms around Beijing distributed mimeographed leaflets among fellow students (Han 1990; Yu 1990). Some participants became aware of the movement through personal networks and by word of mouth (Zuo and Benford 1995).

Protesters also engaged in performances to attract attention and broaden their support base, such as the collective singing of the *Internationale* and assembling at Tiananmen Square (Li 1990). Most effective were arguably the hunger strikes from 13 to 19 May 1989. They galvanized the movement's commitment to nonviolent action to attain its objectives (Zhao 2001). Aside from the hunger strikes, reports and the relevant literature (Dobbs 1989; Gittings 1989; Kristof 1989b; Calhoun 1994; Tong 1998; Meisner 1999; Zhao 2001) also identify the following actions

that contributed to the movement's high visibility: (1) televised dialogues between the movement participants and party leaders; (2) Gorbachev's visit to Beijing during the Sino-Soviet summit in 1989; (3) Zhao Ziyang's visit to the Tiananmen Square to meet with the student protesters; (4) the declaration of martial law on 20 May, which coincided with the confrontation between the Beijing security forces and city residents; and (5) the plea of student leader Wuer Kaixi to leave Tiananmen Square on 22 May. The success of the movement to articulate their demands and express their claims without angering the regime, at least initially, became crucial for visibility (Zuo and Benford 1995).

In the case of the democracy movement in Myanmar, alternative media and underground press were present during the peak of the movement (Schock 1999; Corduneanu-Huci and Osa 2003). After the 1962 coup, Ne Win's military regime took control of all publishing and communication networks and banned all nonstate publications (Schock 1999; Taylor 2009). However, from June to September 1988, around 40 newspapers that published critical pieces against the regime were in circulation in Rangoon (Lintner 1990). Workers sieged state-sponsored newspapers and sought to mobilize the opposition (Guyot 1989). Student accounts stressed the importance of the foreign press such as the BBC and VOA (Voice of America) in disseminating the activities of the movement, spreading eventually in the rural areas where most residents were initially unaware of the nationwide protests (Thompson 1999; Hlaing 2007). BBC correspondent Christopher Gunness interviewed—on radio—some students of Rangoon University, where they described the bleak situation and outlined their demands (Thompson 1999; Hlaing 2007). According to a student leader,

The most important thing was the role of the BBC. The students could not spread the news about 8888 events to the whole country but BBC did the splendid job for us. When it was broadcast by BBC the whole 40 million people know and prepare for it. (Thompson 1999, 35)

Resonance of the movements' claims and narratives

The claims of the Tiananmen movement achieved high consonance; they emphasized not only the grievances of the students but also the issues the masses were facing. Through manifestos, statements, slogans, and speeches (Han 1990; Yu 1990; Zuo and Benford 1995), the movement constructed their claims from two broader themes: (1) critique of injustices caused by the market reforms that were part of Deng Xiaoping's opening-up policy; and (2) commitment to three Chinese cultural traditions: Confucianism, communism, and nationalism. By using these themes, the movement achieved two important objectives. First, by framing their claims through the lens of (in)justice, they won the support of the masses; they critically engaged state-controlled political discourse and raised public awareness that the movement was not a mere product of youth hysteria (Zuo and Benford 1995). Second, by anchoring their arguments within Chinese culture, they disseminated a message that resonated with the public. The following passage from a manifesto entitled *A Letter to Citizens of Beijing*—written by the Beijing Aeronautics Institute Students' Federation—contains significant themes, such as upholding the public interest and pledging loyalty for the motherland.

Our actions is by no means an action of blind impulse; we have a feasible program, clear and definite objectives, and a well-disciplined and powerful organization. We will not accept the control or manipulation of any person, nor will we stoop to compromise. We have no selfish motives or hidden ambitions. Our actions these last few days sprang from our patriotic hearts, from our pure and loyal love for our great motherland. We do not desire to 'plunge the world into chaos' [as has been alleged], nor are we a 'small handful' of bad people with ulterior motives. All we want is do our best to push forward the process of reform and democratization, to try to obtain for the people the most practical benefits possible. (in Han 1990, 76)

The movement succeeded in rebutting and undermining the state's counterframing. The Chinese government had impugned the movement's collective character,⁴ calling it "antirevolutionary turmoil," "plotted conspiracy," and "a violation of the constitution" (Liu 1992; Zuo and Benford 1995; Liang et al. 2001; Zhao 2001). To neutralize these labels, the students—as we saw above—employed frames that call out injustice and, at the same time, dovetail with Chinese cultural traditions (Zuo and Benford 1995). For example, the hunger strikers' slogans, "I Starve for China; I Cry for China" and "Mama, I am Hungry, But I Cannot Eat" (in Zuo and Benford 1995, 147), express their willingness to sacrifice themselves in pursuit of noble principles. The Confucian virtue *si jian* ("remonstration of death"), highly valued in traditional Chinese society, was evident in the hunger strikers, who were willing to die for their country. Furthermore, the government's indifference towards the strike angered Beijing residents, since it went against the Confucian virtues of benevolence (*ren*) and righteousness (*yi*) (Zuo and Benford 1995). This cultural anchoring also helped spare the students from state crackdowns, at least initially, since more people became sympathetic to their cause and even participated in the demonstrations (Zuo and Benford 1995).

The Burmese democracy movement had a different fate. Although they did make their claims known to a wider public, the lack of potent framing undercut the resonance of their messaging. There was widespread mobilization by 8 August, but it mostly came from the ranks of students. While most of them knew that they were protesting against the regime, why they were doing so remained ambiguous at the time (Lintner 1990; Thompson 1999). Some participants thought the mobilization was organized primarily to oppose police brutality, owing to the violent dispersal of student-led protests in March, which had killed some students from Rangoon Institute of Technology. The mobilization, however, changed its tenor when some students articulated their demand to democratize Burma; democracy was an unfamiliar concept to many Burmese, and a pro-democracy movement also exceeded the initial objective of protesting against police violence (Thompson 1999).

Also, unlike in Tiananmen, the Burmese movement failed to address the barrage of counterframes from the state. The government, for example, used themes of xenophobia to argue that international forces would do whatever it took to destabilize the regime (SLORC 1989; Thompson 1999). As a consequence, the people's "perceptions of the government may have changed...but the way they acted toward the government reverted to its previous state," which is deference to their state leaders and the incumbent regime, and, generally, adherence to the status quo (Thompson 1999, 37).

Legitimacy of the movements' claims and narratives

The degree of public support for the Tiananmen movement was well-documented in the media and the scholarly literature (Dobbs 1989; Dodd and Byrnes 1989; Fathers 1989; Kristof 1989a; Neilan 1989; Southerland 1989a; Tong 1998; Meisner 1999). While it is true that the movement was born in Beijing, it gathered momentum as more rallies were organized in cities and regions beyond the capital. In his detailed spatial analysis of city participation in the movement, Tong (1998) shows that 132 out of 434 cities in China reported protest demonstrations. While it only comprised 30.4 percent of the total number of Chinese cities, the 1989 mobilizations have remained the largest in China to date (Tong 1998; Zhao 2001; Katsiaficas 2013).

During the first week of the movement's inception, the aggregate mobilization across 12 cities clocked at 400,000. From 14 to 23 May 1989, aggregate mobilization in all cities reached around six million (Tong 1998). A majority of the defiant cities (90 percent) had at most two days of demonstrations. Beijing, meanwhile, had one everyday since the movement began, i.e. a total of 52 days.⁵ Public support was not just mere attendance; people became active and mobilized. Some citizens occupied the major roads to obstruct the army's advancement towards the square (Dobbs 1989; Dodd and Byrnes 1989; Neilan 1989; Southerland 1989b). Others donated food, clothing, and money (Liu 1990; Zhao 2001).

The Burmese democracy movement saw widespread participation from the middle class, mostly composed of students, professionals, and the urban workers, but failed to mobilize other sectors (Reuters 1988c; Mydans 1988a; Thompson 1999; Guyot 1989). This resulted in low legitimacy. The participation of the workers and the poor was not sustained (Thompson 1999). Also, ethnic minorities—there were 200 different ethnic groups all over the country (Smith 1991; Thompson 1999)—were underrepresented. The protest was “led for the most part by ethnic Burmans (and by the ethnic minorities who were lucky enough to be attending universities) and was never able to build a large-scale base throughout the country” (Thompson 1999, 41).

Student activists who fled to the mountains and went underground were not able to invite the minorities to join. The movement was a “purely urban phenomenon” (Guyot 1989, 125), limited mostly in the city of Rangoon. The rebellion failed to reach the villages, and could have been reinforced had it mobilized the peasants (Guyot 1989). Myanmar in the 1980s was predominantly agricultural (Taylor 2009), and the farmers could have been induced to withdraw their cooperation with the state and to leverage for concessions for themselves, if not for others.

In summary, the strong presence of discursive opportunities for the Tiananmen movement came from the use of various communication platforms, which lent it more visibility. The students were also successful in framing their claims to resonate with other citizens and obtained support from various sectors and neighboring cities. On the contrary, the weak presence of discursive opportunities for the Burmese movement helped contribute to its failure, despite articulating their demands and making them visible to the public.

Conclusion

Through the lens of discursive opportunity structures, this article has analyzed how protests in two nondemocratic regimes in the late 1980s emerged and (failed to) achieve their outcomes. The democracy

movements in China and Myanmar arguably had strong or weak discursive opportunity structures, respectively. In both cases, mobilization became susceptible to issues, and the regime transition did not materialize.

Particularly, in the case of Myanmar, the students raised public awareness of their claims through alternative communication channels, but mere awareness did not suffice to induce broader action. The movement's messages also failed to resonate, and thus did not draw support from a larger social base, such as the ethnic minorities and the peasantry. Indeed, the state's dependence on certain sectors could have been undercut to undermine state power, since "in any society, the state directly depends on segments of its own populace to rule" (Schock 2005, 53). The noncooperation of these groups and entities can exert leverage over the regime (Schock 2005). The movement was not able to, or could not, maximize this opportunity.

Although the visibility of the movement initially helped its mobilization, it did not sustain active participation, and it dwindled accordingly. The movement's objectives remained ambiguous and shifting (Lintner 1990; Thompson 1999), and this led to loss of credibility. Moreover, it failed to combat the pejorative counterframes—the state's persuasive repertoires and propaganda campaigns—that delegitimized the movement and discouraged (further) mobilization. The situation was akin to the case of Poland in 1968; there, the state used racial stereotypes and anti-Semitic tropes against Polish protesters (Osa 1995). Thus, having failed to connect with the public, the Burmese democracy movement appeared distant and irrelevant for many other citizens, and did not achieve experiential commensurability.

The weak presence of discursive opportunities was fatal in the 1988 demonstrations. The lack of resilience in the verge of breakdown (Schock 2005) is partly a product of low resonance and legitimacy, manifested through a failure to negotiate a "shared understanding of some problematic condition or situation they define as in need of change" (Benford and Snow 2000, 615) and, notably, to "demobilize antagonists" (Snow and Benford 1988, 198). Borrowing Thompson (1999, 46), the Burmese protesters "never reached the state where they were willing to throw down their

lives.” This “shared understanding” of a problem provides depth, meaning, and inspiration to any ameliorative collective action; it reinforces the legitimacy of the activities and campaigns of a movement. This construction of a shared reality is also crucial in weathering mobilizational restraints, such as repression, and in fostering sustained collective action, as in the case of the 1986 People Power Revolution in the Philippines, which ousted Ferdinand Marcos and restored democratic rule in the country (Schock 1999, 2005; Gatmaytan 2006).

Discursive opportunities present advantages to any protest movement; they allow the diffusion of claims and messages in the public sphere and generate considerable support from third-party actors. The strong configuration of such opportunities in the Tiananmen movement is characterized by how the movement’s claims were made visible to the public, and resonated by being framed through the lens of (in)justice and culture, a phenomenon that dovetails with studies (e.g. Zald 1996; Gamson and Meyer 1996; Williams and Kubal 1999) that link culture and the resonance of claims. Moreover, the Tiananmen movement gained legitimacy from the support of other sectors in various Chinese regions and cities.

While the Tiananmen movement was able to maximize the discursive opportunities accessible to them, what they did not see coming is the state’s increasing propensity for repression. The students were at best hopeful that the government would cave in—after all, their cause was fortified by the public’s overwhelming support—but the CCP’s lack of willingness to pursue democratization only made the government more resolute to quash the movement. An insight that can be learned from this is that opportunities, discursive and otherwise, are not objective and monolithic insofar as they are perceived by the agents based on the assessment of their conditions. Protest movements are not passive recipients of information, which they process to act upon opportunities that may surface at a given time. They base their decisions and actions on the information that is readily available or accessible to them. Considering they operate in a nondemocratic context, this information asymmetry is

all the more reinforced by restrictions on information flows. Future studies may look into how the movements' perception of these opportunities affect their strategies and repertoires of collective action.

Allowing any movement to sustain support and active participation from a broader, multisectoral constituency, discursive opportunities help us understand how protest movements in autocracies mobilize and contribute to an (un) successful regime change (Koopmans and Olzak 2004; Schock 2005). Their role in protest mobilizations in nondemocratic contexts in Europe, Latin America, and other regions could be further examined to strengthen the generalizability of the framework.

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End Notes

¹ *Authentic voices* refers to materials written by local authors which may or may not be necessarily written in their local language. Some of these materials and texts were written by the authors in English or were translated into English.

² A *Sui coup* occurs when the government ruled by the military is taken by over by the military (Guyot 1989).

- ³ During the Cultural Revolution in China, the *dazibao* (large character posters) became an avenue of communication and information, and was seen as “a bottom-up mode of expression and as a way of making revolution at the grassroots” (Fairbanks Center for Chinese Studies 2017).
- ⁴ These negative labels were used in the People’s Daily editorial published on 26 April 1989.
- ⁵ The movement, according to Tong (1998), began on 15 April 1989, the day when the media announced the death of Hu Yaobang. It ended on 9 June 1989, when Deng Xiaoping reviewed the military troops, which signaled the end of operations in Beijing.

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