Article

# States vs. Social Movements: Protests and State Repression in Asia

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**Abstract**
This study considers how governments use state-sponsored propaganda and state violence in tandem to repress social movements and, in so doing, exacerbate polarization. We specifically focus on cases in young and non-democracies in East and Southeast Asia: China and Hong Kong, the Free Papua Movement in Indonesia, and Myanmar's more recent coup. Using a time series analysis, our analysis reveals a temporal relationship between state propaganda and violence; however, we do not find much evidence that these state actions Granger-cause social movement activities. The exception to this is in Myanmar, where we find that repressive state actions decrease activity in Facebook groups criticizing the Tatmadaw, which in turn increases offline protest activities.

## 1. Introduction

Social movements and protest activities are essential mechanisms for democracy. Through protests, citizens can raise grievances, highlight political inequities, and seek a redress of their political woes. However, in Asia—and specifically in weak democracies or authoritarian countries—governments may try to delegitimize social movements using repressive tactics such as propaganda and violence.

While a substantial amount of scholarly attention has thus far focused on foreign-targeting state-sponsored propaganda (see Bastos & Farkas, 2019), less is known about domestically-targeted state propaganda, particularly in the Global South (Xia, 2021). This highlights a troubling gap in the literature: We know little about how these governments coordinate their repressive strategies and even less about the extent to which these tactics exacerbate political woes and conflicts against social movements.

Seeking to address this gap, this study explores state governments' use of state repression against protesting social movements and the polarizing consequences of these actions. We focus specifically on two forms of state repression: state-sponsored propaganda and state violence. Furthermore, our work reconsiders how polarization operates in non-democratic countries and circumstances. In doing so, our work highlights the importance of studying political communication phenomena in non-Western cases, particularly as it relates to protests and democratizing efforts.

Specifically, we consider three East and Southeast Asian states where the government uses propaganda and violence to repress protest activities: China, Indonesia, and Myanmar. We focus on this region because it is rife with efforts to change regimes, democratize, or secede. While governments and protesters have long been in conflict in Southeast Asia (Boudreau, 2004), digital media presents new opportunities for governments to delegitimize protest efforts.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. State Governments and Social Movements in Southeast Asia

In this study, we examine the conflict between social movements and state governments through the perspective of polarization and asymmetric power. We define social movements as groups that seek to enact social change through non-institutional strategies (Tarrow, 2011), including communicative, collective, and connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Habermas, 1985). Social movements often challenge existing systems (or perceived systems) of political authority (Cross & Snow, 2011; Tilly, 2004) and are therefore in frequent conflict with local and national governments.

The social movements we focus on are grassroots movements that explicitly or implicitly desire to secede or change the state's regime. Regime change movements studied in this article are primarily pro-democracy, demanding a greater degree of autonomy from the primary state government (if not outright ousting of the current leadership); for example, the case of Hong Kong, while focused primarily on the 2019 extradition bill, was undergirded by the disagreements between the pro-democracy movement and Beijing (Holbig, 2020). These social movements utilize a variety of strategies in their pursuit of independence, including both violent and non-violent tactics (Griffiths, 2021). Of particular interest in this study is the use of non-violent protests, understood as a form of political resistance that garners both national and international attention (Hardiman, 2013).

While a growing body of scholarship has highlighted threats to established, Western democracies, such threats are more directly felt and observed in the Global South, in countries that are not democratic or have weak or young democratic institutions. In a weak democracy or autocratic system, state governments can further exploit multiple social apparatuses and tactics (Althusser, 2010) to "eliminate" their opposition. Thus, areas in the Global South, like East and Southeast Asia, are the true battlegrounds of democratic efforts (della Porta, 2020).

Historically, Asian countries have had a turbulent relationship with democratic efforts. Countries like Myanmar and Thailand, for example, oscillate between democratizing and militarized coups that quickly repress upset citizens (Kipgen, 2016). And even in democratic countries, elections populist leaders may dismantle democratic institutions to gain greater power (Case, 2017). Southeast Asian citizens are more likely to take an instrumentalist view of democracy, meaning that they measure the success of a democratic regime based on its ability to govern rather than an adherence to democratic ideals (Pietsch, 2015), suggesting that Southeast Asian countries may be prone to authoritarianism if it brings the promise of more effective leadership.

Despite these challenges, social movements persist across Asia, in democracies and autocracies. While some are ephemeral, emerging as a result of a large political change, many are longstanding and persist despite repeated attempts to silence activists. As digital media affords these movements new opportunities to garner global attention and support (Shen et al., 2020), counties have also had to develop new strategies for delegitimizing opposing activists and social movements.

### 2.2. Cases: East and Southeast Asia

Our analysis will focus on protests and state repression in three Asian countries. The first is the anti-extradition law amendment bill movement in Hong Kong. The second, in Indonesia, is the Free West Papua movement, which seeks to establish an independent West Papua nation. And finally, in Myanmar, we examine the protests surrounding the 2021 military coup, which saw the ousting of then-State Counsellor Aung Sang Suu Kyi following a democratic election.

These cases all share a similarity in that the governments used multiple strategies to repress ongoing protests. However, they also vary in both the structure and resilience of their political communication system. In terms of party structure, for example, China is a one-party system, Indonesia is a multi-party system, and Myanmar (prior to the coup) was a two-party system. The protests being studied also differed in what they wanted to achieve. We expect these variations to produce case-specific differences (Boudreau, 2004).

#### 2.2.1. First Case: The 2019–2020 Hong Kong Protests

The 1997 Hong Kong handover ended the city's 150-year history as a British colony and transformed it into a special administrative region of China (Ching, 2009). At this time, Beijing articulated a "one country, two systems" policy which supposedly guaranteed that Hong Kong would retain some autonomous rule for 50 years (So, 2011). During the first decade, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) generally adhered to this policy (Lee & Chan, 2008). However, in 2012, the central government began to exert its control over Hong Kong when its Liaison Office explicitly supported and lobbied for the election of Leung Chun-Ying to chief executive, the highest office in Hong Kong. This action was widely condemned by Hong Kong citizens, sparking additional protests as more controlling policies were implemented, including the 2012 protests against "moral and national education" and the 2014 Umbrella Movement (Purbrick, 2019).

The distrust between China and Hong Kong reached a peak in 2019 when the Hong Kong government proposed the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill, which would allow transfers of fugitives from Hong Kong to Mainland China ("Tao fan tiao li," 2019). The proposal of this bill motivated a new wave of protests, beginning with a sit-in at a government headquarters on March 15. During this time, clashes between police and protesters

became more frequent and violent, with police firing live bullets targeting protesters' heads and protesters throwing petrol bombs. Correspondingly, the focus of the protests shifted to these police tactics, with protests explicitly calling for an independent commission to study the police's use of force ("Tao fan tiao li," 2019).

Besides the physical confrontation between the protesters and the police, social media was another important battlefield. Both protesters and the CCP sought to spread unverified information or disinformation that would discredit the other (Lee, 2020), though the central government had significantly greater resources to organize a disinformation campaign. While the CCP's troll army utilized a variety of platforms, Twitter emerged as a particularly prominent one because of Hong Kong activists' desires to garner international support (Twitter Safety, 2019).

### 2.2.2. Second Case: The Free Papua Movement

West Papua is a resource-rich territory on the western side of New Guinea; it integrated with Indonesia in 1969 (Blay, 2000). The Dutch allowed Indonesia to form an independent government in 1949 but did not hand over West Papua for more than a decade (Suter, 2001). West Papuans declared their sovereignty, raising their "morning star" flag in 1961, which was disregarded (Cordnell, 2013). Instead, the Dutch temporarily transferred sovereignty of West Papua to Indonesia under the New York Agreement (a 1962 treaty sponsored by the UN) without consulting West Papuans.

As the treaty stipulated that West Papuans have a right to self-determination, the UN oversaw a referendum in 1969: the Act of Free Choice ballot (Saltford, 2000). However, the Indonesian military picked only 1,026 West Papuan leaders to vote, using threats of death to force a unanimous vote (Cordnell, 2013). For this reason, West Papuans often call this referendum the "act of no choice" (Free West Papua Campaign, 2017).

The social movements working towards independence for West Papua are collectively known as the Organisasi Papua Merdeka (OPM, which translates to the "free Papua movement"; see Blay, 2000). Though active since the 1960s, particularly during the anniversary of the New York Agreement (Gault-Williams, 1987; Viartasiwi, 2018), the 21st-century version of the OPM is largely organized by college students (Saud & Ashfaq, 2022). The movement gained attention on August 19, 2019, when 43 Papuan students were arrested for disrespecting (burning) the Indonesian flag (Heryanto, 2019). This led to a series of protests and repeated clashes between the activists and police, resulting in multiple injuries and deaths (Saud & Ashfaq, 2022). Escalating the conflict further, Indonesian police began to utilize more crowd control tactics, including the use of tear gas and rubber bullets (Adjie, 2020).

Like other social movements, young Papuan activists use social media such as Twitter to mobilize, raise awareness, and organize across cities (Panjaitan & Janah, 2022). Owing to its population, Indonesia is the fifth-largest country in terms of Twitter use, with over 24 million active Twitter accounts as of May 2016 (Mononimbar & Mononimbar, 2017). Though Twitter activity has declined since then, as it has had to compete with a growing plethora of other social media networks, Twitter remains a popular platform to discuss ongoing social issues and get news from government officials (Wiraguna et al., 2021).

### 2.2.3. Third Case: The Myanmar Coup

Throughout Myanmar's history, the Tatmadaw—the official name of Myanmar's armed forces—has been a significant part of its ruling structure since Myanmar gained its independence in 1948. Although the military granted civil government in 1960, it reclaimed its power in the 1962 coup. In 1990, believing that Myanmar's citizens would support the military, the military again granted a free election. However, the National League for Democracy (NLD) won. The military refused to give up power and eventually put leader Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest (Erlanger, 1990). The NLD claimed another victory in the 2015 election and the Tatmadaw agreed to give up its reign—but remained a powerful political force as it retained the right to appoint a quarter of the parliament members (Beech, 2021).

In the 2020 election, NLD won in a landslide victory, with over 80% of the votes (ထွန်း [Tun], 2020). Yet the military challenged the result, claiming the election was fraudulent. On February 1, 2021, the military detained Aung San Su Kyi and President U Win Myint, and instigated the 2021 coup (Goldman, 2021). This resulted in widespread non-violent protests across Myanmar in opposition to the Tatmadaw's coup, including labor strikes and pot-banging protests (Oo, 2021). The retaliation against these protests has been swift and bloody. According to Assistance Association for Political Prisoners' (2022) data, at least 1900 civilians have been killed and 11,000 are still detained because of the 2021 coup, as of 2022.

Given its political structure, Myanmar's telecommunication sector remained largely under state control (Kyaw, 2019). Though there were only about 500,000 users in 2011, the brief period of democracy contributed to an explosion in internet use. By 2019, Myanmar had over 21 million users, amounting to roughly 38.8% of its total population (Kemp, 2019). Among these users, Facebook is far and away the most popular platform (Kyaw, 2019). However, less than a month after instigating the coup, Facebook announced that they would ban content or accounts from the Tatmadaw, making it difficult for them to spread propaganda on that platform (Milko, 2021). In lieu, the Tatmadaw turned to other ways of distributing propaganda digitally, including the website Dsinfo (http://dsinfo.org).

## 2.3. Tactics of Government Repression

To study these cases, we must consider the varying strategies that a government can use to control citizens. Though scholars have historically focused on differences by severity, a review of the different tactics would allow researchers to understand how they work in tandem (Boudreau, 2004), both online and offline. In this study, we consider two tactics.

The first tactic that we account for is the use of violence, known as overt coercion (Gupta et al., 1993). State violence includes the mobilization of the military or the deployment of the police to control domestic populations (Johnston, 2012). While the use of state violence is perceived as commonplace in more autocratic countries (Escribà-Folch, 2013), democracies have also used violence to repress their citizenry. In East and Southeast Asia, state violence remains a popular tactic employed by governments or state leaders to maintain control because of its effectiveness (Boudreau, 2004). However, state violence is both expensive and perceived negatively in the international political system. As a result, states are motivated to seek other, complementary tactics.

The second tactic is state propaganda, which refers to a deliberate, systematic attempt to manipulate perceptions, cognitions, and behavior to achieve the desired intent of the propagandist (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012). While states have long used propaganda to control the public during wartime (Meaney, 1951; Risso, 2014), a new form of state-sponsored digital propaganda has become globally prevalent in recent years. Computational propaganda, defined as the assemblage of social media platforms, autonomous agents, and big data tasked with the manipulation of public opinion, has been used by governments to silence and demobilize opposition and generate false support (Woolley & Howard, 2016). To that end, states operate cyber troops, employ various tools ranging from automation (e.g., bots) to human interaction (e.g., trolling), and produce disinformation (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). Using these tactics, states hope to (and often do) diminish the social movements' organizational and promotional capacity.

While there is little research that empirically studies whether a government is more likely to use propaganda or violence, propaganda production is relatively lower in cost compared to troops (Bennett, 2019). This is especially true with the internet, as governments can hire or outsource the production of digital propaganda on websites and social media platforms (Horz, 2021). Therefore, for low-resourced governments in Southeast Asia that want to repress domestic social movements, a digital propaganda campaign is a low-cost strategy. However, propaganda lacks the threatening power of state violence. Based on this logic, we expect that the Indonesian government, CCP, and Tatmadaw will use propaganda as a precursor to state violence (H1).

## 2.4. Government Repression and Polarization

We also consider how these government control tactics increase polarization within their countries by portraying their citizens as enemies of the state. We define polarization as the increasing salience of a difference within a society that reinforces an "us" and "them" tribal mentality (McCoy et al., 2018). While traditionally associated with a party difference (i.e., partisan polarization)—particularly when studying polarization in Western countries (Balčytienė & Juraitė, 2015)—a more expanded view of polarization considers other differences that polarize the citizenry within a country, such as religious or ethnic differences.

Polarization is not a phenomenon exclusive to the West: In the Global South, many political actors amplify polarization in order to achieve political goals (McCoy et al., 2018). Studies of polarization in the Global South have noted the polarizing effect of populist leaders (Uyheng & Montiel, 2020). This is especially problematic in Southeast Asia given the success of populist leaders in elections and the frequency with which these populist leaders become dictators (Case, 2017), including Suharto of Indonesia (Roosa, 2008). It is therefore important to consider how state leaders and governments may exacerbate polarization to achieve their political goals.

The damage that polarization induced by a state government has on democratic efforts and systems cannot be understated. For fledgling democracies, rapid polarization can help populist leaders exploit weak democratic institutions to win elections and gain political power. Countries in transition to democracies are also the most prone to political repression and violence (Regan & Henderson, 2002). At its most extreme, polarization can exacerbate differences to the extent that one political party may seek out authoritarian rule, utilizing whatever tactics are within its grasp to exclude oppositional members (McCoy et al., 2018).

In response to state-driven polarization, citizens can respond in several ways, including by organizing social movements. Employing a more traditional approach, the public may be more likely to protest when state governments employ strong and repressive tactics (Honari, 2018). Social movements may also use self-created news organizations to advance their beliefs and arguments (Agur & Frisch, 2019). This may damage democratic efforts further, as the availability of polarized news coverage can reorder social networks, build on cultural cleavages (Tokita et al., 2021), and make it difficult for pro-democracy social movements to successfully garner support (Camaj, 2021).

And finally, social movements may find a place to air their grievances on social media, which affords them the ability to organize and increase pressure against the state government. As independence and secession movements are often portrayed negatively in mainstream or state-owned media outlets, the internet has become critical for the relatively open production and dissemination

of pro-democracy political opinions, even in states with substantial censorship (Tang & Sampson, 2012).

What remains unclear, however, is the extent to which social movements are willing to protest once governments in Southeast Asia employ repressive tactics (i.e., propaganda and violence). It is possible that state repression, for example, produces a chilling effect that diminishes people's willingness to participate in social movements. However, citizens could also be emboldened to protest more, as Hong Kong activists had done in 2012 and 2014 (Purbrick, 2019).

In addition to H1, we then pose two research questions:

RQ1: In Hong Kong, West Papua, and Myanmar does more state propaganda production predict a change in social movement activities?

RQ2: In Hong Kong, West Papua, and Myanmar does more state violence predict a change in social movement activities?

## 3. Method: Using Time Series to Study Temporal Relationships

### 3.1. Data Collection

For our three cases, we analyzed at least four variables: (a) a daily count of anti-government protests organized by civilians; (b) a daily count of violent events instigated by a state government, its military, its police force, or a surrogate; (c) a daily count of the propaganda produced by a state-sponsored actor; and (d) daily counts of ideologically competing outlets within the country.

### 3.1.1. Event Variables

To construct a count of protests, we use the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (Raleigh, et al., 2010), focusing on protests organized by civilians that are critical of their domestic government. To construct a count of violent state coercion, we use the Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone, a computationally-constructed event dataset (Leetaru & Schrodt, 2013). For our state violence time series, we focused on events instigated by a state's government (GOV), military (MIL), or police (COP); in the case of China, we also consider criminals (CRM) because the CCP regularly relies on "thugs-for-hire" (Ong, 2018) targeting a civilian population (CVL). We also only considered violent events with the following CAMEO verb codes: exhibit military posture (15), coerce (17), assault (18), fight, (19), and engage in unconventional mass violence (20). In the context of this study, violent events include situations when a government entity injures, threatens to injure, or kills a protester or civilian.

### 3.1.2. Propaganda Variable

To construct a count of propaganda messages for our cases, we relied on a variety of sources. For China/Hong Kong and Indonesia/West Papua, we utilized Twitter's information archive, specifically, the June 2020 archive of Chinese disinformation and the February 2020 archive of Indonesian disinformation targeting OPM (Twitter Safety, 2020). For Myanmar, we scraped articles posted on the "News" tab of the Dsinfo website, which is the Tatmadaw information team propaganda website.

### 3.1.3. News Variables

To construct counts of the news outlets in China/Hong Kong, Indonesia/West Papua, and Myanmar, we selected at least two outlets from each country. These outlets needed to be ideologically opposed; meaning that at least one outlet was pro-independence or pro-social movement and at least one outlet was pro-government.

For the China/Hong Kong case, we collected from the pro-Democracy newspaper *Apple Daily* using a Reddit archive (r/HongKong), the neutral newspaper *MingPao* from MediaCloud (Roberts, et al., 2021), and the pro-CCP outlet *China Daily* from LexisNexis (Weaver & Bimber, 2008). For the latter, we used the keywords 反修例 ("anti-amendment regulations"), 逃犯條例 ("extradition bill"), 反對逃犯條例修訂草案運動 ("the anti-extradition law amendment bill movement"), 時代革命 ("revolution of the times"), 修例风波 ("amendment regulation disturbance"), 暴亂 ("riot"), 暴動 ("riot"), and 五大訴求 ("five demands'').

For the Indonesian/West Papua case, we collected content from two outlets. The first was *Kompas*, one of the largest circulating newspapers in Indonesia (Muqsith et al., 2021), collected using MediaCloud (Roberts et al., 2021). Importantly, *Kompas* coverage of the protests was heavily critical of the protesting activities, particularly desecrating the Indonesian flag (Harsa & Rofil, 2021). The second is *West Papua Daily*, the largest circulating newspaper in Papua. Relative to *Kompas*, *West Papua Daily* is more likely to provide coverage from the perspective of the protesters (Harsa & Rofil, 2021). To collect *West Papua Daily* articles, we scraped the collection of articles available on their website. For both outlets, we searched for articles with the following keywords: "Organisasi Papua Merdeka" and its acronym "OPM," *konflict papua* ("Papua conflict"), "Jacob Prai" (the leader of OPM), "Republik Papua Barat" (the name of the proposed new country), *unjuk rasa* ("rally"), *kerusuhan* ("riot"), and *kemerdekaan* ("independence").

And, finally, in the Myanmar case, we collected news articles from four outlets using MediaCloud. Two outlets, *Irrawaddy* and *DVB*, are non-profit news organizations that are typically critical of the military government ("Myanmar military regime sues," 2021). *Myanmar News*, the third outlet, is an international-oriented outlet that brings global attention to Burmese

issues. Finally, the fourth outlet, *Myawaddy Daily*, is a military-owned newspaper. For this case, we searched using the following keywords: ပြည်သူ့ရဲတပ်ဖွဲ့ ("Myanmar police force"), အမျိုးသား ဒီမိုကရေစီ အဖွဲ့ချုပ် ("National League for Democracy"), အမျိုးသားညီညွတ်ရေး အစိုးရ ("National Unity Government"), တပ်မတော် ("Tatmadaw"), အောင်ဆန်းစုကြည် ("Aung San Suu Kyi"), မင်းအောင်လှိုင် ("Gen Min Aung Hlaing"), စစ်တပ် ("military"), and ဒီမိုကရေစီ ("democracy").

Finally, for Myanmar, we also collected Facebook content from CrowdTangle (2021), using the aforementioned keywords (this constituted a fifth variable for the Myanmar case).

### 3.2. Data Analysis

To test the temporal relationship between state violence and propaganda, we used a time series analysis; specifically, we constructed three vector autoregression (VARs) models, one for each country. In addition to treating violence (measured using GDELT) and propaganda (measured using a combination of scraped and archived digital data) as endogenous variables, we also included the following endogenous variables as controls: a daily count of protests and counts of news stories from domestic media. In the case of Myanmar, we include a fifth variable—a daily count of Facebook activity in groups and pages discussing the Myanmar coup.

We supplemented this with a close, qualitative textual analysis of a subset (n = 50) of propaganda messages in each case. To contextualize our findings, we present and discuss some of these messages in the results.

## 4. Results: Unpacking the Temporal Relationship Between Propaganda and State Violence

### 4.1. China and Hong Kong: Framing Protesters as Rioters to Justify Violence

Our analysis of state coercion in China and Hong Kong was centered around the 2019 Hong Kong protests. The VAR model examining state coercion in Hong Kong consisted of four types of variables: (a) counts of violent events by the Hong Kong Police Force; (b) counts of

protests in Hong Kong that opposed Chinese oversight, (c) the number of disinformation tweets produced by CCP trolls, and (d) counts of news stories about protests in Hong Kong from three different news outlets (this was disaggregated in our model)—the pro-democracy outlet *Apple Daily*, the neutral outlet *Ming Pao*, and the state-sponsored outlet *China Daily.*

We pre-processed these time series by first differencing the integrated components and removing the weekly seasonality in the *Ming Pao* time series. The Bayesian Information Criterion suggested a VAR(2) model (BIC = 4182.064).

Granger causality tests provided evidence that a rise in propaganda tweets preceded a rise in violent state activities ($\chi^2$ = 3.876, p = 0.023). However, we did not find a statistically significant relationship in the opposite direction ($\chi^2$ = 0.249, p = 0.780). Our IRF confirmed the relationship between propaganda and violence but also found that it is short-lived, lasting two days (see Figure 1).

During this time, CCP trolls produced a variety of anti-protest propaganda. While some posts were in other languages to reach international audiences, the vast majority of tweets were written in Chinese characters. All these tweets framed the protesters as rioters, emphasizing their harmful or destabilizing actions. By contrast, the Hong Kong police were hailed as heroes and protectors of society.

Compared to the other cases, propaganda produced by CCP was the most specific to the event, and several tweets directly referenced individual protests. For example, in the tweet below (with translation), posted on June 22, a CCP troll refers to a protest that took place the day before:

6月21日,反對派又策劃實施咗一場黑衣人游行,並占領了稅務大廳,大批示威者包圍了警察總部,掟雞蛋,架設路障封閉道路。

On June 21, the opposition planned and carried out a parade of people in black, and occupied the tax hall. A large number of demonstrators surrounded the police headquarters, beat eggs, and erected barricades to close the road.
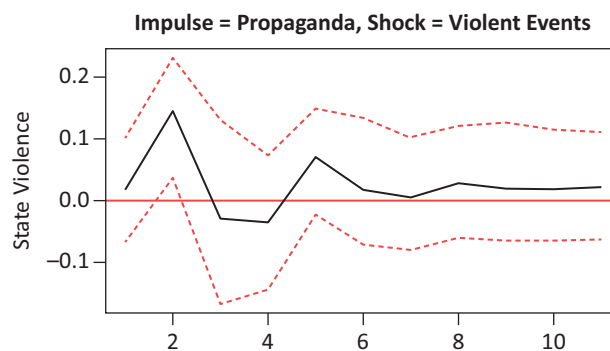


**Impulse = Propaganda, Shock = Violent Events**

**Figure 1.** Impulse response function of propaganda on state violence, China.

Based on the GDELT data, there were more clashes between Hong Kong police and protesters over the next two days, with police using tear gas and rubber bullets to injure protesters, to the point where other countries would not sell crowd control equipment to Hong Kong (Wintour, 2019).

In terms of the other variables in mind, we also found that state violence events Granger-caused more articles in *Ming Pao* ($\chi^2$ = 7.426, p < 0.001), and that propaganda Granger-caused more stories in *China Daily*. One reason for this increase in coverage may be an attempt to explain the state's actions. However, we did not find this pattern for *Apple Daily*, the pro-democracy outlet, and coercive state tactics did not Granger-cause any protest activity.

### 4.2. Indonesia and West Papua: Disinforming Citizens About the OPM

The VAR examining Indonesian state control of the Free Papua Movement consisted of four variables: (a) counts of violent state events, (b) a daily count of protests in West Papua, (c) the number of disinformation messages produced by Indonesian trolls, and (d) counts of news stories about the OPM in the Indonesian news outlet *Kompas* and *West Papua Daily*. After pre-processing the time series by first differencing the integrated components, we then constructed the VAR, using the BIC to settle on a lag of three (BIC = 10927.62).

Granger causality tests revealed that state propaganda Granger-caused violence ($\chi^2$ = 2.729, p = 0.05), but not the other way around ($\chi^2$ = 0.717, p = 0.54). Our IRF showed that the relationship between propaganda and violence persists for three days (see Figure 2).

During this time, the Indonesian government produced propaganda on Twitter in English and Bahasa Indonesia. Often, these tweets used first-person pronouns to create the appearance that an individual was sharing an opinion, as in the following example (with translation):

> Saya benar-benar menginginkan Papua yang damai dan sejujurnya para anggota OPM ataupun simpati-

sannya selalu menentang usaha-usaha menuju Papua yang damai.

> I really want a peaceful Papua and to be honest the members of the OPM or their sympathizers have always opposed efforts towards a peaceful Papua.

Other propaganda tweets contained disinformation about the social movement, including one false claim that OPM was founded by the Dutch:

> Organisasi Papua Merdeka adalah organisasi yg didirikan pada thn 1963 olh pemerintahan Belanda sbg upaya utk mendirikan negara tandingan nagar papua tidak menyatu dgn Indonesia.

> The Free Papua Organization is an organization founded in 1963 by the Dutch government as an effort to establish a rival state so that Papua is not integrated with Indonesia.

Many of these tweets also used the same hashtags in the same order, including popular hashtags like #freewestpapua and opinion-specific hashtags like #LawanGerakanSeparatis (highlighting opposition to the separatist movement). This implies simplicity from the Indonesian disinformation campaign, whose trolls were likely told to copy and paste a list of hashtags at the end of each tweet.

In terms of news, we find that protests Granger-cause news coverage in *Kompas* ($\chi^2$ = 7.295, p < 0.001), but not in pro-democracy outlet *West Papua Daily*.

### 4.3. Myanmar: Election Fraud Propaganda

Finally, we examine the relationship between state coercion strategies in Myanmar during and following the 2021 coup, from February 1 to June 6, 2021. It contains five variable types: (a) a count of violent events conducted by the Tatmadaw, (b) a count of propaganda messages produced by the Tatmadaw for the website Dsinfo, (c) a daily count of protests in Myanmar, (d) a count of Facebook messages in Burmese and English
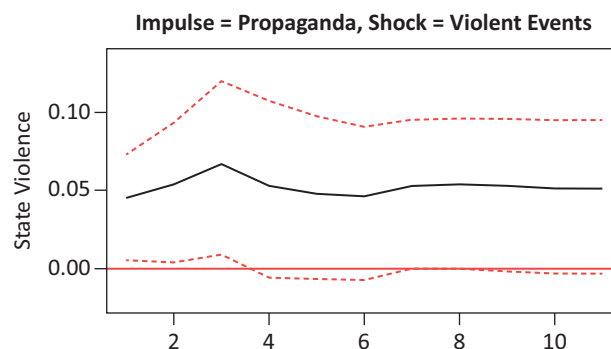


**Figure 2.** Impulse response function of propaganda on state violence, Indonesia.

about the coup, and (e) counts of news stories from four news outlets—*DVB*, *Irrawaddy*, *Myawaddy Daily*, and *Myanmar News*.

After pre-processing the time series by first differencing the integrated components and removing, we then constructed the VAR using the BIC to settle on a lag of two (BIC = 2239.92).

Our Granger causality results reveal a bidirectional relationship between propaganda and violence: propaganda Granger-causes violence ($\chi^2$ = 6.946, p < 0.001) and violence Granger-causes propaganda ($\chi^2$ = 7.731, p < 0.001). Our IRFs confirmed an increase in propaganda leads to an increase in state violence at a lag of two (see Figure 3), but state violence did not lead to an increase in propaganda.

The propaganda messages produced during this time are noteworthy because, after their removal from Facebook, the Tatmadaw began publishing its propaganda on the website dsinfo.org. Unlike social media messages, the Dsinfo messages were longer and read more like press releases as opposed to shorter posts. By and large, these posts were focused on legitimizing the Tatmadaw's regime, both by spreading false election claims and by framing the Tatmadaw as a bastion of democracy. For example, in a post about an ongoing protest, the Tatmadaw included the paragraph below (with translation):

သဘောထားမတူမှုတို့အပေါ် မင်းမဲ့ စရိုက်ဆန်စွာ ရန်စတိုက်ခိုက်မှုမျိုးဆောင်ရွက်ခြင်းသည် ဒီမိုကရေစီကျင့်ဝတ်နှင့် တည်ဆဲ ဥပဒေပေါ် ချိုးဖောက်ကျူးလွန်ခြင်းဖြစ်ကြောင်းနှင့် ရန်စတိုက်ခိုက်မှုများကို ဦးဆောင် ပြုလုပ်သူများအား လိုအပ်သည့် စုံစမ်းဖော်ထုတ်မှုပြုလုပ်၍ တရားဥပဒေနှင့်အညီ ထိရောက်စွာ အရေးယူဆောင်ရွက်သွားမည်ဖြစ်ကြောင်း သတင်းရရှိသည်။

Dissenting, anarchic attacks violate democratic ethics and existing laws, and those responsible will be prosecuted in accordance with the law.

In doing so, they framed themselves as being the group to determine acceptable "democratic ethics and exist-

ing laws." When protesters or the NLD were mentioned, they were framed very negatively, as rioters, insurgents, or terrorists.

Our model also highlights several relationships between other variables and Facebook activity: state violence Granger-causes Facebook activity ($\chi^2$ = 5.216, p = 0.007) and Facebook activity Granger-causes both protests ($\chi^2$ = 3.947, p = 0.04) and news stories in *Myawaddy Daily* ($\chi^2$ = 9.926, p < 0.000). The impulse response functions (see Figure 4) suggested a negative relationship between state violence and Facebook, and a positive relationship between Facebook and protests. In other words: More posts in anti-Tatmadaw Facebook groups increased the number of protests; however, increase state violence led to decreased Facebook activity.

Finally, we found some potential agenda-setting relationships: *Myanmar News* Granger-caused *Irrawaddy* news ($\chi^2$ = 12.124, p < 0.000) and *Irrawaddy* news Granger-caused Facebook activity ($\chi^2$ = 3.500, p < 0.03). These findings suggest that reactions to state repressive tactics may be more identifiable through social media rather than news media.

### 4.4. Model Comparisons

Our analysis of these cases revealed some key similarities and differences. First, let us begin with a summary of Granger causality tests (see Table 1).

One consistent finding is that propaganda preceded violence as a state repression tactic; however, the reverse was not found. These findings provide evidence for H1: Governments' use of propaganda preceded state violence targeted at social movements and activists. Note that this is not a causal finding, but a temporal one: Propaganda does not cause violence, but an increase in propaganda may be useful to predict forthcoming violence.

Another similarity we find is in the content of the propaganda messages: In all three cases, the goal of some propaganda messages was to polarize people's perceptions of the opposing social movement. However, countries varied in the discursive strategies they employed. Whereas Indonesian propaganda relied
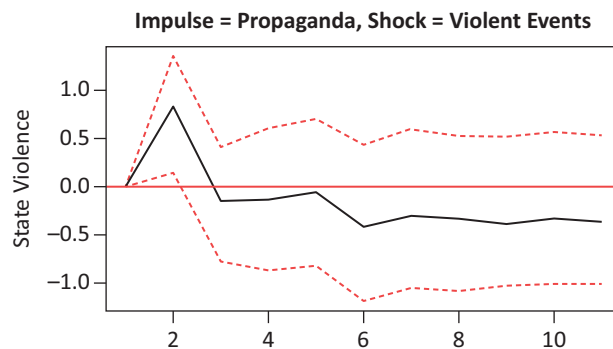


**Figure 3.** Impulse response function of propaganda on state violence, Myanmar.
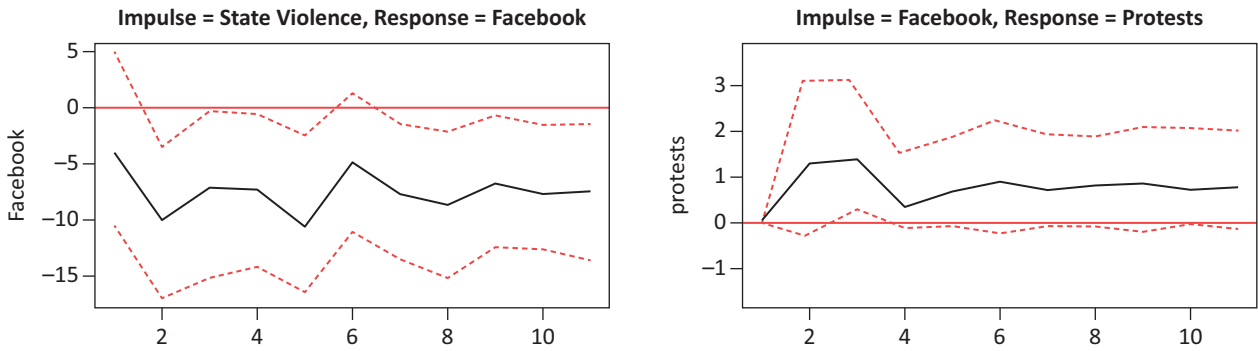
**Figure 4.** Impulse response function about Facebook activity, Myanmar.

on disinformation about the development of the OPM, Chinese disinformation highlighted specific claims of violence to motivate disapproval of the Hong Kong protests. Focusing more on election fraud claims, the Tatmadaw repeatedly brought up democratic principles, but framed themselves as pro-democracy and the NLD as anti-democratic.

We also find varying levels of sophistication. Whereas Chinese propaganda messages relied on a variety of hashtags, Indonesian tweets used the same hashtags in the same order, which makes the latter easier to identify. Myanmar, compared to the other two cases, had an even simpler propaganda campaign. The reasons for these differences are likely motivated by the conflict's contextual factors and the state governments' resources: Myanmar's disinformation and violence campaign may have been simpler because the Tatmadaw needed to build a response to the protests quickly, whereas China and Indonesia have been in continue disagreement with protesters for years.

In addition to the polarizing propaganda and the temporal relationship between state repressive strategies, we also asked two research questions regarding whether a rise in propaganda (RQ1) and state violence (RQ2) would predict a change in social movement activities, which could include protests, pro-democracy/secession news activity, or (in the case of Myanmar) social media activity. Our results provide little evidence that state coercion Granger-caused protests or increased coverage from pro-democracy or secession outlets, though we do find that state coercive tactics could increase news coverage in pro-government and moderate outlets.

In Myanmar, however, we find that state violence decreased Facebook activity, which in turn Granger-caused more offline protests. This suggests that the polar-

izing conflict between social movements and state governments may be especially prevalent on social media and highlights the need for greater integration of social media data with offline activities and consequences.

## 5. Discussion: Implications of Findings for Future Research and Activism

In addition to confirming the use of different tactics for state repression (Boudreau, 2004; Gupta et al., 1993), this study also suggests that states strategically coordinate their tactics. As propaganda is cheaper to utilize than military or police violence (Bennett, 2019), weak states that seek to control their citizenry may be incentivized to use propaganda first for cost reasons. However, given the persistence of the protests, it appears that states still often resort to violence as it often guarantees the dispersal of protesters (whether by arrests, pain, or death).

The content of the messages also revealed how states can potentially aggravate polarization (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021), particularly by contrasting the government as good and the protesters as evil. While it is beyond the scope of this analysis to assess the persuasiveness of these messages, it is worth noting the variability of the discursive tactics used, including references to specific events (China), disinformation (Indonesia), personalized language (Indonesia), and reframing the government as positive in addition to framing the opposition as negative (China and Myanmar). These insights help advance the concept of polarization beyond Western countries and highlight the ability of states to exacerbate polarization to delegitimize oppositional protests.

Given that the relationship between state coercive strategies is temporally predictable, this information may

**Table 1.** Summary of Granger causality test results between propaganda and violence.

|  | Propaganda → Violence | | Violence → Propaganda | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | $\chi^2$ | p-value | $\chi^2$ | p-value |
| China | 3.876 | 0.023 | 0.249 | 0.780 |
| Indonesia | 2.729 | 0.043 | 0.718 | 0.541 |
| Myanmar | 6.945 | 0.001 | 7.731 | 0.001 |

also be valuable for democratic social movements to predict and avoid state violence. Such an insight would be especially important to protesters in East and Southeast Asia, where the political regime landscape is constantly changing (Case, 2017).

No study is perfect, and there is no exception. First, our analyses focus on three cases in East and Southeast Asia, and the generalizability of these findings may be limited beyond this region. Additionally, our Myanmar case included a unique data layer: social media discourse about the Tatmadaw. Given the statistically significant findings based on the inclusion of social media metrics, this work suggests a need to conflict more analyses of how online activity and offline discourse intersect.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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