

***Opposing Power: Building Opposition Alliances in Electoral Autocracies.* By Elvin Ong. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2022. Softcover: 297pp.**

At the heart of Elvin Ong’s book is the question “Under what conditions will opposition parties and their leaders build pre-electoral alliances?” (p. 5). Much of the scholarly literature on coalition formation has focused on coalitions that form in the aftermath of elections. However, the analytical focus has increasingly been broadened to accommodate coalitions that form before elections. Recognizing the role of opposition parties play in the democratization process, Ong focuses on the factors that determine the formation of pre-electoral alliances in electoral autocracies.

By engaging with the complex literature on coalition formation and democratization, and utilizing four case studies from East and Southeast Asia, Ong argues that the opposition elites’ perceptions of regime vulnerability and of their mutual dependence for victory shape how opposition alliances are built in electoral autocracies. By validating this argument, the author successfully provides more analytical clarity about the variety of pathways towards democratization for countries that are categorized as electoral autocracies.

The first part of the book sets the tone with an introduction to the theoretical and research design of the project, offering details about the challenges of building opposition alliances, coordination problems, regime vulnerability and inter-party dependence. Ong explains that pre-electoral alliances are challenging to build and rare under electoral authoritarianism for four reasons: the difficulty in fostering ideological compromise; the challenges of electoral systems; the lack of credible commitment; and autocratic interference. He goes on to identify the two aspects that opposition parties should coordinate on: candidate selection or allocation, and a joint electoral campaign against the autocrats. This entails compromises and can only emerge under unique conditions. Based on this, Ong argues how the two variables—the opposition elites’ perceptions of regime vulnerability and of their mutual dependence—become conditional upon the autocratic environment because these two forms of coordination entail costly compromise among opposition parties.

In the second and third parts of the book, Ong uses four case studies to illustrate his central argument. Part two explores how

the opposition's perceptions of their mutual dependence came into play in the examples of the Philippines and South Korea. The Philippines case focuses on the successful formation of an opposition alliance in the run-up to the snap presidential elections called by Philippine autocrat Ferdinand Marcos in February 1986. The opposition alliance between Corazon Aquino and Salvador Laurel was the result of their perceptions of their mutual dependency, and created a high degree of confidence in their eventual electoral victory. In contrast, Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung lacked such perceptions of their mutual dependence during the December 1987 presidential elections in South Korea. As a result, the opposition challenge to the Roh Tae Woo military regime was unsuccessful.

In the third part of the book, which deals with perceptions of regime vulnerability, Ong discusses Malaysia and Singapore. Ong's solid empirical discussion sets the scene for an interesting comparative analysis. By comparing these two ex-British colonies in Southeast Asia, Ong demonstrates the temporal variation in regime vulnerability and its effects. The cases of Malaysia and Singapore reveal that ethnic mobilization in the decolonization process played a vital role in shaping the political parties, including the opposition ones. As a result, Malaysia successfully constructed opposition alliances, while Singapore did the opposite. It also shows how the differences in party systems, and the nature of opposition parties, can lead to variations in the opposition's coordination outcomes.

Ong's work represents a significant contribution to the emerging but growing scholarship on coalition formation and democratization, especially in non-democratic settings. However, it would have been helpful if the author had clarified whether the terms "electoral authoritarianism" and "electoral autocracy" (both of them are used throughout the text) are synonymous. Understandably, every book has its limitations when using comparative analysis, and the same is true for Ong's book, where the focus is on the four case studies of Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and South Korea. Moreover, Ong's discussion in Part two is not as sophisticated as his analysis in Part three, as the reader is given less empirical information on the coalition formation processes in the Philippines and South Korea.

Nevertheless, Ong's book is a valuable contribution to the literature on opposition alliance formation under electoral authoritarianism and its relation to democratization in two ways. First, with its comparative analysis of East and Southeast Asia regimes, this book

tests existing theoretical accounts developed in different social, economic and cultural contexts. Second, it extends the existing explanations of opposition alliance formation by incorporating additional explanatory factors that are particularly relevant to East and Southeast Asia. Ong's scholarship adds significant nuance to our understanding of how opposition leaders operate under electoral authoritarianism.

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