

Why some revolutions fail

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



Many revolutions occurred around the world in the past hundreds years, mainly in the developing world, and some of them succeed, while others failed. In this essay, the aim is to examine the why is that some have succeeded while others failed.

Before proceeding to the examination of the question, it is necessary to define the term ‘ revolution’ and how to define a revolution as success or failure. In this essay, I understand revolution as “ any and all instances in which a state or political regime is overthrown and thereby transformed by a popular movement in an irregular, extra-constitutional, and/or violent fashion.” ^[1] And base on this definition, a successful revolution is one that can overthrow the existing regime. Interestingly, this definition provides some insight to the question, as revolution involves popular movement, therefore not surprisingly; the popularity of the mobilisation of the masses is one factor to consider for the question. Revolutions are never solely a result of economic injustice or even exploitation; they are a response to a brutal, oppressive government. This is the principle of this essay. I will argue that certain political factors, namely the exclusionary nature of the existing regime and the formation of the revolutionary coalition and its popularity, helps to make revolutions more likely to succeed.

The first factor I will discuss is the formation of the revolutionary coalitions and its popularity. Quite often, revolution begins with a particular sector of the society, and then others join in to form a coalition, united by common objective. In the third world, where revolutions are usually responses to imperialism, nationalism served as a very useful political tool. The role of

peasants is very central in uprisings. However my argument is that to succeed in a revolution, there must be a coalition. Ideally it will comprise different ethnic or social classes. One key group that can be significantly decisive to the outcome is the professional revolutionary organisation. This is the urban intellectuals or the middle class. The argument here is not that a particular group is more important than others; each group plays an important role in organising the revolution movement in their own way. However, for the revolution movement to be a successful one, it is necessary for these groups to work together. Indeed, successful revolution movement in Vietnam and Nicaragua, the coalition by the revolution had the peasants and middle class, “ but also of landless and migrant laborers, rural artisans, rich peasants, and even landlord.” [2] It is the supports form different sectors of the society that will increase the chance of success. The ability for the revolutionary coalition to be as inclusive as possible has a role in determining the likelihood of success. A revolution fails because like the regime it is trying to overthrow, the revolutionary force also fails to address to the grievances of different social groups. To be able to organise a coalition with wide ranging groups can avoid this weakness.

The next question regarding the formation of revolution coalition is why different groups join together. A coalition that has internal tension and rivalry is not going to last long, let alone making the revolution more likely to success. The answer, drawing from observations based on successful revolutions, is that revolutionary coalition will employ different discourses, like religious and nationalist. Under these discourses, the coalition can legitimate the resistant movement to the regime and also grouping different

social classes. The Marxist ideology, the notion of class struggle will not be particularly beneficial as a discourse. The coalition needs to attract as many, diverse classes as possible, and by emphasising class struggle will defeat the point. Therefore ironically, revolutionary coalition led by Marxists group had been more successful when they had put less emphasis on class struggle. The most common discourse, also the most powerful discourse is nationalism. It has proven to be more inclusive, has a more appealing effect on different social classes.

So far, I have identified nationalism as a popular and powerful discourse for revolutionary movements to gain momentum and thrive for success. However, the revolution cannot simply be an ideological one. A popular revolutionary coalition need to deliver something physical, delivering collective goods had proven to be the key. This is especially the case for economically less developed countries, where the existing regime has rarely provided anything for its population. The argument is that the coalition strengthened support by providing collective goods, generating progress and eventually overthrows the existing regime. The coalition maintains supports by its actions, which helps to develop its own loyal client network. This is especially relevant to the question, failed attempt of revolutions, are the ones that fail to turn action into words.

A successful revolutionary coalition is one that can gather social groups, groups that are originally excluded by the existing regime. So if the coalition can incorporate a broader level of social groups, it will make the revolution more likely to success. To determine how broad the level of social groups

that are available to incorporate, this correlated to the second factor I consider to be important, the exclusionary nature of the existing regime. The argument is that the more exclusive the regime, meaning the less social groups it chose to incorporate with, the more potential the coalition can incorporate and mobilise with.

Revolution itself is a reactionary product and is not bred in a political vacuum. The political context which revolution movements operate in is determined by the nature of the existing regime. Needless to say, revolution is usually against an authoritarian regime. And it is the closed or exclusionary one where if a revolution took place, it is more likely to succeed. On the contrary, a more inclusionary authoritarian regime is difficult to overthrow. Despite the lack of civil rights and public participation in public affairs, these inclusionary authoritarian regimes maintain in power through patronage, they incorporated with social groups that they deemed their supports are important, where they will give benefits to these groups in return for their loyalty. This narrows the political spaces for the revolutionary coalition can take place, hence diminish the probability of a successful revolution.

An exclusionary regime are advantageous for the revolutionary coalition, the coalition will be more likely to have a broader combination of social groups. This is because of a number of reasons. Firstly, groups that are excluded by the regime, when there is economic discontent as a result, will be politicised. Trade Unions are one example, whereby excluded by the regime, their functions will be severely limited. The politicisation of trade unions is

inevitable because they must gain political power within the political structure in order to function properly. This applies to other lower class groups and their relevant organisation. The second reason is concerned with the lack of political legitimacy of the exclusionary regime. This lack of political legitimacy is a common challenge faced by any type of authoritarian regime, any kind of discontent in regards to social, political or economic issues will combined into questioning the legitimacy of the existing regime. The illegitimate nature of the regime will solidified the legitimacy of the revolutionary movement. And lastly, because of this exclusionary nature of the regime, it cannot incorporate necessary social groups into its political structure, which would have enabled the regime to dilute the formation of the revolutionary coalition and prevent any revolutions. It should be noted that so far I have discussed how an exclusionary regime is unable to provide channel for participations of social groups, however there is a possibility of an exclusionary regime, perhaps under wise leadership, decided to adapt into a more inclusionary approach to handle the threat of revolution. Therefore, I would argue that not only exclusionary nature of regime is necessary for a revolution to succeed; the regime also has to be incapable of reform, it is inflexible.

An inflexible, exclusionary regime is usually one of the following two types, a colonial government of direct ruled by the imperial power or a dictator ruled regime. The inflexible nature of this two type will makes this type of regime an ideal type for revolutionary coalition to succeed. The common between these two types is its relation with foreign power. The relation between a colonial government and foreign power is self-evident; a dictator, if being

seen as the best option for stability in a chaotic region or a reliable anti-communist alliance during the cold war period, will usually find backing from abroad. This foreign power backing fuels the popularity and legitimacy of nationalist discourse employed by the revolutionary coalition to unite different social groups. As mentioned before, nationalism appeals across different levels of social groups and the association of the regime with foreign power will provide a more powerful, clear image of a common enemy. Hence, foreign backings contribute to uniting revolutionary coalitions. Foreign backing is also one of the reasons why these exclusionary regimes are particularly inflexible. Dictators acting as stability forces in the region, may enjoy financial rewards for their efforts, however, it also means they render their autonomy on certain domestic issues. Any attempts for the dictator to widen participations can backfire with discontent from abroad. The foreign interest in the regime is for it to remain stable, any changes in the political structure, even with good intentions, invite uncertainty to stability. The possibilities of revolutions are not of concern for the foreign power, and when a revolutionary coalition can incorporate local elites and middle class groups that are ideal for establishing liberal democracy, foreign power will withdraw their support for the dictator. In the case of direct colonial government, it will also generate momentum for the revolutionary coalition's nationalist discourse. The interest of colonialists to hold positions in senior level administrative roles and profitable business sectors will fuse the frustration of the elite and middle class, as a consequence, these groups will join the revolutionary coalition. And it will not consider widening participation of these domestic social groups, as that will weaken the power of the foreign

power, contradict to the purpose of direct ruled. The conclusion is an association between the regime and foreign powers will provide a common enemy, a negative coalition can be formed against this common enemy. And as previously argue, a revolutionary coalition with broad support across the society is more likely to succeed, the image of foreign power helps the coalition to broaden its support. The existing regime becomes a symbol of antinational, standing on the opposite end of the nationalism discourse the revolutionary coalition is advancing.

Foreign backing, associating with the existing regime makes the revolution more likely to succeed. Foreign backing on the revolutionary coalition will also have a positive effect on the outcome of the revolution. The argument is brought forward by Robert Dix, where he used the revolution in Cuba and Nicaragua as example:

“ The anti-regime coalition included key international actors that served as sources of refuge, training, and material and diplomatic support for the revolutionaries.... Thus Castro’s forces were able to assemble and train in Mexico, and received various kinds of assistance from the governments of Venezuela and Costa Rica.... The United States cut off military aid to Batista in April 1958.... The Nicaraguan revolutionaries received aid from several of that country’s Central American and Caribbean neighbors.... Other Latin American revolutionaries have been sorely lacking in this regard.... None were able to obtain either the level of international legitimacy or the degree of tangible assistance gained by their counterparts in Cuba or Nicaragua.” [3]

Dix examples of Cuba and Nicaragua showed how foreign states can affect

the outcome, actively engage in the case of the Venezuela and Costa Rica, by providing assistance to Castro, or passively in the case of United States, by withdrawing support from the existing regime. However, I would add that such foreign backing, especially the “ active” kind can easily back fire. The revolutionary coalition under the name of nationalism would seem contradicting once its dependence on this foreign assistance exceeds a certain point. Indeed, this certain point is matter of degree and it is not possible to draw a line in practice. This point I am trying to illustrate is that foreign backing on revolutionary coalition can be a reason why revolution succeed, however at the same time, it can be a reason why revolution fail.

Leon Trotsky once wrote that “ the mere existence of privations is not enough to cause an insurrection; if it were, the masses would be always in revolt.” ^[4] In this essay, I have demonstrated how Trotsky’s word is still relevant. I have argued that it is the political factors that have a crucial impact of the determining the outcome of revolution. The two factors I consider to be important are the success of forming a revolutionary coalition, where it encompasses a broad level of different social groups and the existing political context, which is determine by the existing regime and the more exclusive and inflexible ones are particularly vulnerable to revolution. The argument I advanced is that the political relationship between the existing regime, various sections within the society and foreign states, provide insight in why revolution is more likely to succeed under particular circumstance. The formation of revolutionary coalition is closely linked to this political relationship, and I have examined how successful coalition had worked under this circumstance. It should be noted that these factors do not

guarantee the success; however the lack or absent of these factors will make failure as an inevitable outcome.

Bibliography

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