Interview – Bann Seng Tan

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, FEB 7 2021

Bann Seng Tan is an Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Relations at Ashoka University, India. His research revolves around the causes and effects of democratization. His latest book, *International Aid and Democracy Promotion*: *Liberalization at the Margins*, studies state to state bargaining in order to advance democracy using foreign aid. His current focus is on the impact of democratization in the context of rivalry as a way to test for the effects of democratic peace. His other tertiary research interests include the politics of aid, the political economy of natural disasters, aid in decentralization and resurgent authoritarianism. He received his PhD in Political Science from City University New York (CUNY), Graduate Centre. Before Ashoka, he was a tenure track Assistant Professor at Bogazici University (Turkey). He held visiting positions at William and Mary and at New York University. He has also previously taught at Hunter and Queens College, CUNY.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I do not claim to speak for the field as a whole; but the following is what I find personally refreshing. The field of IR is bifurcated into a minority who cares about liberal democracy and a majority that is indifferent. From the perspective of that minority, there is a sense that the crisis of liberal democracies has reached a nadir. The recent assault on the US capitol is one such inflection point. Those committed to liberal democracy are starting to realize the stakes involved and recognize the threat stemming from authoritarian regimes. The formation of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China is an example of one such response.

There are innovations on the theoretical front as well. A world in the grip of resurgent authoritarianism should logically behave differently from an order composed of liberal democracies. A recent piece by Tom Ginsburg articulates how autocrats subvert international institutions and international law to further authoritarian survival. I doubt autocrats will enjoy the critical attention into their motives and methods. After all, the more we understand about the ways of authoritarianism, the better informed the democratic pushback will be.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I used to subscribe to the traditional divide between international and domestic politics. As the cliché goes, politics stop at the water's edge. I gradually realized this view is wrong. Much of international politics can be explained by concerns that are primarily domestic, especially by the imperative of political survival. To explain the policy proclivities of states, we start by identifying the key political actors and understand their motivations. Typically, the primary motive is political survival. Only after we understand the preferences of the elites can we begin to translate those preferences into likely policy outcomes. Regime type, for instance – democracy or autocracy – is merely a theoretical shorthand. It expresses a set of political economy attributes that given the preferences of their respective elites, go together.

The implications of this view are profound. As a teaching example, consider the behavior of the former President Trump towards Russia. He can either deny or acknowledge Russian interference into US elections. When the chief executive of a state is forced to choose between his political survival *or* the people's welfare, the logic of political survival predicts *he will choose the former*. This accounts for a wide range of policy outcomes, including overt

hostility to the West, diversionary wars, sanctions, low economic growth, nepotism, and endemic corruption. To use another expression, *all politics is local*.

How do you define "democracy aid?"

Democracy aid is a specific type of foreign aid. It refers to international assistance with the specific goal of fostering and advancing democratization. This term is a shorthand and is attributed to Carothers. Operationally, I follow the OECD Credit Reporting System (CRS) with regards to the purpose of individual aid projects. I classify an aid project to be for democracy promotion if the purpose code of individual aid project falls within the category of government and civil society (with AidData 2.1 purpose codes 15000 to 15200; Tierney et al. 2011). In addition, I include projects that support non-governmental and governmental organizations (codes 92000 to 92030) but exclude those projects with generic budget support (codes 15110). The former category of aid is included because funding non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is a way to promote democracy by supporting its civil society. The latter category is excluded because unconditional budget support from the donor to the recipient is highly fungible.

In your recently published book, you discussed the link between foreign aid and the promotion of democracy. Can you tell us more about this and how your findings challenge common perceptions?

The book argues that we should take the incentive structure of key actors into account in democracy promotion. Since political liberalization hurts authoritarian recipients, they can be expected to offer alternative policy concessions for aid in lieu of democratization and donors, eager for policy compliance, may not do enough to promote political liberalization. This means that some recipients like Egypt will have leverage against the West and are effectively immune to donor pressure. It also implies that some recipients, like Fiji, will lack the attributes to make counteroffers attractive enough to the West. Those who do not offer much benefit to the donor in terms of security or commercial opportunities or what I call *secondary recipients*, are more likely to liberalize at the price of receiving aid. Thus, secondary recipients should be the proper emphasis of democracy aid. If we filter recipients by their leverage, democracy promotion with aid need not be a lost cause.

In everyday conversations, a common refrain is that Western aid donors are hypocritical because they do not prioritize democracy promotion as much as they claim to be. I address this charge in the same way I treat the declarations of autocrats. I treat their rhetoric as cheap talk and focus instead on their revealed preferences. What is more, I take the preferences of the aid donors as they are and not as I would like them to be. If donors always let recipients with strategic and commercial value get away with a lack of democratization, then a path to democracy promotion is through recipients without such value.

Taking a closer look at the impact of foreign aid on democracy, what are the incentives for cooperation and opposition between aid donors and recipients?

The political economy of aid requires us to identify the actors and understand their imperatives. Donors want political reforms but accord it a lower priority than the commercial and strategic concessions that they could have gotten in exchange for the aid. The authoritarian recipients would like the aid without painful political reforms. They could offer commercial and strategic concessions to donors to get the aid without reforms. This is a bargaining scenario. Each side has something that the other wants. This gives both sides an incentive to cooperate. The competition stems from the fact that recipients may have exit options.

How is foreign aid evolving in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic? Do you think it is suited to meet the short- and long-term challenges of this global health crisis?

I am not an expert on global health so I will focus on the pandemic's impact on policy performance and on regime survival. It is worth recalling that across regime types in Asia, the pandemic response spans a full spectrum. Going by the conventional coding of the Polity Project, authoritarian states like China and Singapore *and* democratic states like Taiwan and New Zealand have been performing better than their peers. This track record does not support a claim that autocracies are performing better.

In the short run, the pandemic helps authoritarian survival. Pre-pandemic, many authoritarian regimes were already facing a wave of popular protests. The Economist Intelligence Unit notes 2019 and 2020 were years of protest. Even China had to deal with the protestors in Hong Kong. The pandemic prevented the literal aggregation of masses and increased the relative power of the state over society. It is a godsend for authoritarian survival. In the long run, the pandemic exposed incompetence in authoritarian governance. Autocracies tend to privilege loyalty over competence as a recruitment strategy. The resultant misgovernance is predictable. Their populace can contrast this with the policy performance of democracies – such comparisons play to the comparative advantage of democracies.

There has been a significant rollback of democratic standards in the past year. If you were to suggest a new approach to the way foreign aid is being facilitated today, what would it be like?

I have two suggestions. First, accept that for all liberal democracies, democracy promotion is at best a tertiary concern, behind economic and strategic objectives. It is therefore unwise to seek democracy promotion in countries with a lot of economic and strategic value to the donors. Second, understand that even a mild attempt at democracy promotion will provoke a fierce backlash by authoritarian states. Regime change undermines the political survival of authoritarian elites, it is not convincing to portray such attempts as “mostly harmless”. Make the attempt and prepare for the inevitable backlash.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

There is an oversupply of PhDs and not enough tenure track jobs. Such a market gives leverage to the powers-that-be. They can increase the requirements for entry level jobs (Assistant Professors) and depress wages (using adjuncts) knowing that the demand for jobs is so high that it will be met. This situation has been true for a long time. With the pandemic, undergraduates cannot find decent jobs in the private sector. A typical response in an economic downturn is to seek out graduate school as a recession shelter. This creates excessive demand for graduate schools. Interestingly, the powers-that-be seem to recognize this is unsustainable. Over 140 universities already froze their PhDs intake. This increases the pressure to get the few graduate slots that are left. The pandemic has increased competition in a market that was already tight. For the motivated students, none of the foregoing matters. The push factors for them are simply too great. For the rest, I merely suggest this: You should do your homework on the nature of the academic job market before taking the plunge.