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Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Democratization

Edited by William Case

Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Democratization

Southeast Asia, an economically dynamic and strategically vital region, seemed until recently to be transiting to more democratic politics. This progress has suddenly stalled or even gone into reverse, requiring that analysts seriously rethink their expectations and theorizing. The *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Democratization* provides the first book-length account of the reasons for democracy's declining fortunes in the region today. Combining theory and case studies, it is structured in four major sections:

- stunted trajectories and unhelpful milieus
- wavering social forces
- uncertain institutions
- country cases and democratic guises.

This interdisciplinary reference work addresses topics including the impact of belief systems, historical records, regional and global contexts, civil society, ethnicity, women, Islam, and social media. The performance of political institutions is also assessed, and the volume offers a series of in-depth case studies, evaluating the country records of particular democratic, hybrid, and authoritarian regimes from a democratization perspective. Bringing together nearly 30 key international experts in the field, this cutting-edge Handbook offers a comprehensive and fresh investigation into democracy in the region.

This timely survey will be essential reading for scholars and students of democratization and Asian politics, as well as policymakers concerned with democracy's setbacks in Southeast Asia and the implications for the region's citizens.

William Case is Professor in Asian and International Relations and former Director of the Southeast Asia Research Centre at City University of Hong Kong. He has held teaching or visiting research positions at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur; the National University of Malaysia; the University (Institute) MARA in Shah Alam, Malaysia; Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand; and the Centre for Strategies and International Studies in Jakarta, Indonesia. His most recent book is *Contemporary Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia*.

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Part 1

Stunted trajectories and unhelpful milieus

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Democracy's mixed fortunes in Southeast Asia

Torpor, change, and trade-offs

William Case

In his book *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democracy*, Jason Brownlee (2007) observed that throughout the Third Wave a strand of authoritarian regimes, distinguished by dominant parties, managed to persist. Indeed, this category began to swell as dictators observed that they could best avoid democracy by mimicking its procedures (Carrothers 2002; Diamond 2002; Ottaway 2003; Levitsky and Way 2010; Schedler 2013). Holding multiparty elections atop an uneven playing field, the dominant parties that they formed generally prevailed, gaining some legitimating cover, ordering elite-level relations, energizing constituencies, and exposing opposition refuges. In this context, Larry Diamond lamented in 2008 that, after a run of more than three decades, democracy was suffering from “rollback” and recession. Taking stock, Freedom House (2014) declared in its annual *Freedom in the World* report that 2013 marked the eighth consecutive year in which civil liberties and political freedoms had contracted globally. Analysts took commensurate flight, with David Art (2012: 351) remarking that the “‘transitology’ paradigm . . . now has the taste of ashes.” A sudden “switch in scholarly focus” has swept research agendas from questions about democratic change to authoritarian durability.

What need is there, then, for a book about democracy in Southeast Asia today? For a number of reasons, Southeast Asia was never addressed by analysts from a perspective of democratic change in the way that other regions were. Its diversity of regime forms was too great, seemingly immune to the regional “snowballing” (Huntington 1991) and cross-national leverage and linkage (Levitsky and Way 2010) that elsewhere herded countries in democratic directions. Moreover, despite this diversity, few countries in the region seemed to meet many of what were once commonly cast as democracy’s preconditions. For example, though state apparatuses in Southeast Asia might be large, apart from Singapore and to some extent Malaysia (Slater 2010), they have remained ramshackle and disjointed, their writ barely extending in some cases beyond capital cities. Hence, they have lacked the “useable bureaucracy” and often the “hierarchical military” that Linz and Stepan (2011) viewed as preliminary to democracy’s functioning. In these circumstances, rather than firmly applying good governance, states are leached of their assets by top officials, generals, and connected tycoons.

In addition, most societies in Southeast Asia are deeply fractionalized by ethnolinguistic, religious, and spatial identities. But, while this fissiparousness can sometimes foster procedural Madisonian balance, in Southeast Asia it has more often perpetuated dominant parties and

secessionist movements, the latter severely negating the “stateness” that Linz and Stepan (2011) also regarded as fundamental for democracy. To be sure, new urban middle classes have sprung up in the region, usually regarded by modernization theorists as a democratizing force. Yet, while episodically performing the agency role assigned to them, they have more generally been sated by rising living standards and daunted by more vast lower classes (Sinpeng and Arugay, this volume). Further, while they may convene civil society organizations, they often remain ambivalent over democracy’s worth, split along ethnic or religious lines, and estranged from the associational life of workers and peasants (Weiss, this volume).

What is more, the economies of many countries in Southeast Asia are distorted by foreign investment that saps even those that might democratize of the autonomy needed for a locally beneficial provision of public goods and an equitable distribution of surpluses. To be sure, the so-called “ASEAN 5” countries of Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and, at least briefly, the Philippines did grow rapidly during the 1990s, incubating new entrepreneurs, uplifting the middle class, and vitalizing ranks of industrial workers. They built potential, then, for new trans-class coalitions that might one day gather in pursuit of democratic change. But meanwhile, where rapid expansion took place during this period, it was abruptly terminated at the end of the decade by fearsome economic shock. Recovery has since been modest, with all of the ASEAN 5 countries save Singapore now “trapped” at lower-middle or middle income levels.

Even so, some countries in Southeast Asia have developed enough that modernization theorists might regard them as poised for democratization. But, as local specialists often counter, the region’s richest countries, Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei, have remained steadfastly authoritarian. Indeed, Diamond (2003) colorfully remarks that Singapore is “the richest authoritarian state in the history of the world.” In contrast, more modestly endowed countries like the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia possess substantial democratic experience. Thus, if anything, high levels of wealth in Southeast Asia, whether generated by sophisticated services, manufacturing, or oil, do as much to prop up authoritarian rule as to democratize politics (Stubbs 2001). The state is plied with resources, enabling it to placate political elites and their business allies with rents, the middle class with career tracks and status, and groups of mass-level supporters with populist programs.

In peering beyond political, structural, and developmental factors to deeper historical legacies, however, do we find any better preconditions for democracy in Southeast Asia? Colonial experience might seem helpful, with the British having imparted what Myron Weiner (1987) regards as democratic “tutelage” in Burma, Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei—states that in earlier guises had been their possessions. Moreover, the United States sought throughout its tenure in the Philippines to install political parties and elections (Pye 1985). And though the Dutch did little explicitly to promote democracy in Indonesia, the West provided so persuasive a demonstration effect that during the 1950s the country adopted a parliamentary form of government. However, amid the plural, even “divided” societies that the British formed in their colonies through which to operate extractive economies, the weak bureaucratic apparatus and skewed land holding systems that the Americans perpetuated in the Philippines, and the refusal of the Dutch to provide any serious tutelage in Indonesia, factors favorable to democracy were negated. Thus, in all these cases, newly instituted democracies succumbed to a “reverse wave” during the late 1950s to 1960s that was global in scope (Huntington 1991), yielding military governments, personal dictatorships, single-party dominant systems, or some protean combination of authoritarian subtypes.

But despite this reversal, some electoral procedures survived. Carl Trocki (1998: 8) thus concluded that in “recent decades . . . democratic forms, including elected legislative bodies and executives, regular elections, political parties, written constitutions, and formal guarantees of

political and individual human liberties have become part of the legitimizing apparatus of most Southeast Asian nations.” But democracy failed to find any deeper roots in Southeast Asia, even during its worldwide resurgence during the Third Wave. Indeed, where elections failed to refresh the tenures of incumbent governments, their results were grievously distorted or even blatantly rescinded—as they were in the Philippines in 1986, in Myanmar in 1990, and in Cambodia in 1999.

Of course, in the Philippines, shortly after the election was stolen by President Marcos, politics were famously re-democratized through “people power” (see Thompson 1995). And a military coup that had been mounted in Thailand in 1991 was wound back a year later. Episodes like these raised hopes that the Third Wave had begun finally to lap at Southeast Asia. Yet evidence of gross electoral cheating cropped up again in the Philippines in 2005. And the military mounted yet another coup in Thailand in 2006. The Philippines and Thailand were thus “downgraded” once more by Freedom House to respective ratings of “partly free” and “not free.” These re-evaluations seemed justified also by worsening violations of civil liberties, involving extrajudicial killings of journalists and activists in the Philippines and still more onerous revisions to *lèse-majesté* laws in Thailand. At this juncture, then, with Southeast Asia bereft of any regimes regarded as fully democratic, Don Emmerson (1995: 226) branded it as the world’s most “recalcitrant region.”

Turning from preconditions to transitional processes, we find the particular route by which re-democratization took place in the Philippines and also in Thailand to be either ambiguous or unhelpful. Most analysts, even when detecting local differences that give rise to nuanced accounts (see Boudreau 2009), regard “people power” in the Philippines, “Black May” in Thailand, and the student processions and Jakarta riots that precipitated Indonesia’s transition in 1998 to be “bottom-up” in their dynamics (Aspinall 2013; but also see Fukuoka, this volume). Labeling this route as “replacement,” Huntington (1991: 276) understood it as the mode of transition which, because of its swift and far-reaching character, was least likely to stabilize. In their classic analysis, O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986: 69) warned further that where such transitions threatened the “inviolable property rights of the bourgeoisie” or the “institutional existence, assets, and hierarchy” of the armed forces, they grew vulnerable to authoritarian “backlash.”

Thus, a great irony appeared when Indonesia, its violent and bottom-up pathway to democracy seemingly so fraught, was reclassified by Freedom House as politically “free” in 2008. This was mostly justified by Indonesia’s legislature having extended direct elections from the presidency to provincial and district-level executive offices, a reform that restored to Southeast Asia at least a single democracy. It also cheered observers on another count, at last delivering a case in which democratic politics seemed compatible with Islamic belief systems. In accounting for democracy’s “unexpected caller” from Indonesia (Case 2000), Donald Horowitz (2013) has recently turned our attention from bottom-up processes of transition to elite-level choices about the timing of elections and institutional reforms. In brief, by holding elections before reforming the constitution, legislators secured their positions, and thus they were motivated to put institutions in place that would perpetuate the democratic functioning by which they had come to power. Hence, through unorthodox sequencing, personal stakes and institutional reforms intersected in ways that Horowitz believes to have been crucial for democracy’s survival in the Indonesia case. However, with legislators afterward colluding in a feverish pursuit of patronage, they fostered no opposition to hold them accountable. It was in this way, then, that despite the bottom-up mode of Indonesia’s transition to democracy, elites avoided threats to their “inviolable interests”. Accordingly, amid the “money politics” that soon flourished (Aspinall, this volume), Horowitz hews to a theme that pervades many of the contributions to this volume: democracy best stabilizes where its quality remains low.

However, even if we accept this logic of a trade-off between its stability and quality, democracy soon came under strain in Indonesia. Evidently adjudging their interests to be insufficiently protected, legislators imposed new controls on civil society organizations in 2013. They also sought repeatedly to weaken the country's anticorruption agency, a surprisingly toothsome watchdog. And they contemplated abolishing the direct election of local officials, the very reform that had earned their regime's ranking as "free" (Arifianto 2014). Thus, in its 2014 report—published a year after Horowitz's book—Freedom House re-evaluated Indonesia as only "partly free," again leaving Southeast Asia with nary a country case that could be classified as a full democracy. Moreover, when later in the year a new president, Joko Widodo, was elected, the process was marred by the loser's challenging the outcome through the courts and the legislature. On this count, we note also in passing that macro-level institutions, whether presidential or parliamentary in design, have failed equally to resist erosion (see Hicken and Kuhonta, this volume). In Indonesia, President Yudhoyono neglected during his second term to use his executive power to guard against democracy's rollback. In the Philippines, further Marcos used his office to break down democracy through an executive coup. And in Thailand, the military has repeatedly mounted coups by which parliamentary systems have been overturned.

Thus, if it is difficult to examine Southeast Asia's politics through the lenses of democracy's stabilization, can we make more fruitful assessments about its breakdown? Dan Slater (2010: 12, fn 33) advises that we cannot even do this, for though the region is distinguished by its vaunted diversity, it is still short of a "requisite" variability. With democracy in all cases having collapsed, we have no continuous record of operation in the region against which to compare. Unable to identify any factors across cases, then, that encourage democracy's survival, whether involving preconditions, transitional pathways, or institutional outcomes, we cannot say which ones are missing in the cases of democracy's demise.

And yet, it is also hard to write of authoritarian durability in Southeast Asia. Single-party systems persist, of course, in Vietnam and Laos. But despite their originating "fortuitously" in violent conflicts that bind their founders together and discipline successors (Levitsky and Way 2012), the Communist parties in these countries have long since shed their ideological fervor. And as economic performance falters too, they seem obliged to rely more heavily on costly coercion. Less robust forms of authoritarian rule are still more readily corroded by economic adversity. Harried by indebtedness and a plummeting currency, the last personal dictatorship in the region vanished with Marcos in the Philippines nearly three decades ago. Facing economic sanctions and mounting dependence on China, the last military government, in Myanmar, has dispersed amid some form of transition.

To be sure, the single-party dominant systems noted at the outset of this chapter are still practiced in Singapore, Malaysia, and Cambodia. But elections in these countries have grown increasingly uncertain in their outcomes, with opposition parties recently making great strides in all three cases. In Singapore, Stephan Ortmann (this volume) contends that with the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) having won only 60 percent of the popular vote in the last general election, held in 2011, the country's longtime electoral authoritarian variant of single-party dominance has unraveled into *competitive* authoritarianism, intimating that defeat of the ruling PAP is now at least imaginable. In Malaysia, the ruling Barisan Nasional (National Front) fared even worse in the last election, held in 2013, winning less than half the popular vote. Hence, the extent to which the Barisan government must rely on severe electoral manipulations in order to retain power has been laid bare, weakening its claims to legitimacy. In this case, then, elections may be shifting in their functionality from "regime-sustaining" to "regime-subverting" roles (Schedler 2002: 29). And hence, in order to inhibit any process of what Staffan Lindberg (2009) labels "democratization by election," the government leans harder on its pliant judiciary (see

Dressel, this volume), charging opposition leaders and activists under the country's assembly law, its sedition law, the penal code, and various other acts. But a sustained manipulation of elections and a mounting use of coercion cannot conceal the fact that Malaysia's government is no longer supported by most of its citizens. The burdens on an authoritarian regime that had already been strained thus render it increasingly brittle. Similarly in Cambodia, electoral authoritarianism has grown distended with competitiveness, with the opposition making great gains against the ruling Cambodian People's Party in the last election, held in 2013 (*New York Times*, 28 July 2013).

If there is, then, any political trend in Southeast Asia today, we detect net movement toward more competitive politics. But alongside other parts of the world that are constructed as regions, this progress in Southeast Asia, while significant, has been halting, dispersed, ever susceptible to rollback, cumulating in a fluctuating trajectory that Slater (2013) depicts as "careening." Indeed, this trajectory may dip more deeply, amounting to outright breakdown. As canvased briefly above, democracy in the Southeast Asian setting finds shaky foundations in its preconditions, transitional processes, and institutional designs. Even so, enough democratic change has taken place that these categories deserve a lengthy revisiting. Their collective record and impact are complex, unsettled, and riddled with surprises. We are cautioned, then, about trying at this stage to construct any integrated theoretical account. But as a preliminary step, this book aims to assess democracy's progress and prospects in Southeast Asia from a great multitude of vantage points. It draws deeply, then, on the expertise of many specialists in the region's politics and societies. In its first section, analysts broadly survey the region through wide fisheye lenses, assessing value systems, human rights, regional forces, and global contexts. In the next sections, they focus intently on particular social formations, attitudes, and institutions. And in the final part, they hone in on a series of country cases. Throughout this collective undertaking, much skepticism is evident over the prospects for democratic change, its stabilization—where it occurs—and the benefits that it brings. Indeed, the very worth of democracy as it is practiced in the region is relentlessly probed.

However, in assembling these critical assessments, this book aims to achieve several things. First, it better accords with the scholarly temper of our era, eschewing the untested prescriptiveness with which much of the early literature on democratization was inflected. Taking stock of several decades of episodic democratic experience, and influenced by theorized notions of "feckless pluralism" (Carrothers 2002: 10) and "disenchantment" (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986: 51), the contributors to this volume deepen our mood of reflected disappointment. But second, they also shun a newer, likely more seductive paradigm in which authoritarian rule is viewed as better able to endure. Though in Southeast Asia democratization may stutter along its arc, it appears more favored and better propelled by time's passage.

Accordingly, in following on from the path-breaking volume *Southeast Asia in Political Science*, edited by Erik Martinez Kuhonta, Dan Slater, and Tuong Vu (published in 2008 by Stanford University Press), this book marks another effort to bring variables from the region to the attention of generalist writing on democratization. Southeast Asianists typically bemoan their cherished collection of countries taking a back seat to Latin America and the like. Indeed, Southeast Asia has never attracted the concerted scrutiny that even countries in the Middle East and North Africa did recently—an attention that seems misplaced, for despite the synchronicity with which authoritarianism collapsed across the region, the chances of democracy stabilizing, let alone gaining quality, are exceedingly bleak. On this score, Mietzner and Aspinall once ruefully observed that Indonesia's transition, however momentous, occurred so late in the Third Wave that "scholars of comparative political science initially showed little interest" (2010: 3).

To reiterate, except at the time of postwar decolonization, democratic transitions have not taken place in Southeast Asia with wavelike simultaneity. They have unfolded instead at different

junctures and in apparent isolation, reinforcing distant perceptions of hyper-diversity, even fragmentation, and rendering Southeast Asia inauthentic as a region, idiosyncratic in the exoticism of its variables, and resistant to meaningful generalization. Thus, taking this view, the region barely seems useable as even a tester of the hypotheses generated elsewhere. But though the contributions to this book may not cohere in any tight set of propositions drawn from Southeast Asia's causal intra-connectedness, they urgently present new data and interpretations based on a wide area of issue areas and country experiences. And as they do this, they show deftness in tracing out themes across borders, framed most notably in terms of democracy's stability and quality. Their skeptical tone is also beneficial in a practical way. In doubting the restraint of militaries, the motivations of legislatures, and the vitality of civil society, for example, they enumerate democracy's many weaknesses, hence indicating too what must be done in order to stabilize it. And in registering frailties in the rule of law, governance, policy responsiveness, and executive accountability, they shed light on what better quality might look like.

Unhelpful milieus and stunted trajectories

In a lead-off chapter, Mark Thompson observes that one way in which dictators try to avoid political democracy is by reconstructing it with new meaning. Hence, in examining broad sets of values, Thompson rehearses the notion of "Asian democracy," a doctrine propagated by ideologues in Singapore and to a lesser extent in Malaysia that avows the irrelevance of civil liberties amid Southeast Asia's collectivist norms. Most analysts dismissed Asian democracy and the notion of Asian values that underpinned it as self-serving, disembodied, and, in any event, discredited finally by the Asian economic crisis during the late 1990s, with group loyalties shown mainly to nourish cronyist behaviors. But as Thompson shows, this is to misunderstand Asian democracy in two ways. First, while proponents had been made confident by the region's rapid industrialization, they were always less interested in explaining this than in reinforcing political order and social hierarchy. Second, they were less focused on rebuffing Western critics than on galvanizing their own citizens. As such, when Western economies were struck by financial crisis in 2007–08, Asian democracy regained much purchase, revitalizing debate in Singapore and Malaysia, while finding new resonance with royalists in Thailand, soft-liners in Myanmar, and regionalists seeking to deepen ASEAN's unifying properties. Thus, while its long-term impact remains unclear, Asian democracy will continue to complicate liberal democracy's progress in the Southeast Asian setting.

Next, while civil liberties remain stunted across much of Southeast Asia, Sorpong Peou shows that human rights are too, even in new democracies. But Sorpong does not attribute this to any uncongenial value sets. Rather, he ascribes this to particular features of the transitions that have taken place, notably, elite-level splits in the Philippines and Thailand and foreign imposition in Cambodia and East Timor. Such divisions and imposition, Sorpong contends, hardly motivate governments, even after democratization has taken place, to assume the commitments and sense of restraint that are necessary for human rights to flourish.

Shifting to an international context, Mark Beeson and Kelly Gerard note further that the regionalism promoted by ASEAN and the linkage imposed by the West are similarly unhelpful in fostering democratic change. In Western Europe, regionalism is viewed as helping extend democratization to Eastern Europe as the EU expanded. But among the member countries of ASEAN, approaches to liberalizing agendas and engagement with civil society, commencing after the Asian financial crisis, have been carried out in ways that foil the openness and consultation that they were ostensibly intended to bring about. According to Beeson and Gerard, ASEAN's main thrust has instead been more to insulate the authoritarian regimes of its member

states than to promote any democratic change. They conclude that "ASEAN [has] provided a fig leaf of respectability and mutual support for regimes that were often bywords of human rights abuses" (p. 55). Further, quoting Jürgen Rüländ (2009: 379), they note that though Indonesia has democratized, then adopted a "self-styled role as ASEAN's 'normative power,'" few demonstration effects have yet been felt. To the contrary, Indonesia "is regarded by fellow ASEAN members as a dual threat: it nurtures apprehension about Indonesian hegemony in ASEAN and, especially in the non-democratic ASEAN member states, fears of an erosion of domestic political stability." Accordingly, Myanmar's new openness can hardly be attributed to ASEAN's preferences and influence, but instead to sanctions imposed by the West and to apprehension over China. Far from amounting, then, to any force for democratic change, ASEAN's own continuity may be placed at risk by the contrary pathways along which its members traverse.

Thomas Pepinsky shifts to a still larger international plane, for if ASEAN has little bearing on the forms that regimes take in Southeast Asia, globalization surely does. This is not to say that endogenous features like prior regime types, domestic economies, and social structures lack causal primacy. But they can only be understood when assessed in tandem with "global forces," namely, colonial legacies, direct and "spectacular" military assaults, great power rivalries and pressures, and international trade, investment, and financial shocks. These features must also be considered amid global ideas like democracy, capitalism, developmentalism, and Islamism wherein they originate or through which they are refracted. But further, to the extent that these global forces matter, Pepinsky contends that they have not generally worked in democracy's favor. However, to see this, Pepinsky's message comes with a methodological plea for an "autonomous" approach to the analysis of politics in Southeast Asia. Seeking to break out of the disciplinary realms of comparative politics and international relations into which Political Science is conventionally demarcated, he calls for a new kind of area studies.

Wavering social forces

Contributors in the next section narrow their focus from sets of values and international contexts to elites and social forces in Southeast Asia, tracing implications for democratic change. Yuki Fukuoka revisits the pathways of democratization in the Philippines and Indonesia. He challenges mainstream understandings of these transitions as primarily bottom-up in their character, most famously made manifest in "people power." Rather, like Sorpong, he sees elite-level splits as the chief driver in these cases, according with what Huntington once labeled as top-down "transformation." Huntington also argued that because this process was regulated by elites as they renegotiated their relations, their interests remained secure. And hence, more than through a bottom-up, potentially far-reaching mode of replacement, democracy would better stabilize. However, though Fukuoka broadly concurs, he argues that a trade-off then sets in, with quality stunted. He notes, for example, that business elites soon discover that despite the ouster during the transition of the neopatrimonialist leaders Marcos and Suharto, who had nurtured them, their interests can be well served by the "formal democracy" that follows.

In a co-authored chapter, Aim Sinpeng and Aries Arugay, in examining democratic transition in the Philippines and Thailand more closely, turn to the role of the middle class. Arugay observes that the middle class may sometimes act as a democratizing agent, as it did in the Philippines in 1986. But it behaved very differently a decade and a half later, helping oust an elected president, Joseph Estrada, after growing alarm over his corruption and peccadilloes. What is more, the middle class gained sanction for its protests, dubbed People Power II, from military leaders who were evidently seeking to head off a rebellion from mid-ranking officers within their non-hierarchical military as well as a surge of "militant leftists" within the anti-Estrada coalition.

In this case, then, the middle class favored good governance over elected government and cooperated with the military in hopes of attaining it.

Sinpeng argues that in Thailand, the middle class has been even more ambivalent about democracy's worth. She revisits the military's overthrow of the elected government of Chatichai Choonhavan in 1991, noting the complacency with which this break in the country's democratic record was met by the middle class. Only after General Suchinda reneged on earlier pledges and seized the prime ministership in 1992 was the middle class finally prompted to act, triggering the confrontation labeled Black May. But this skepticism over the middle class' commitments to democracy may be surprising. Students sacrificed much in support of democratic change during the mid-1970s. Civil society groups also pressed steadily for democratization during the 1980s, culminating in a free election in 1988. Students coalesced with workers to re-democratize politics in 1992, as mentioned above. And civil society groups grew active again when helping author the "People's Constitution" toward the end of the decade and then demonstrated, amid severe economic crisis, in support of its passage.

But Sinpeng is surely right to argue that after the constitution enabled Thaksin Shinawatra to amass executive power, then refresh it reliably through elections, Thailand's middle class soured on majoritarian approaches to democracy. However, though its class interests and status were threatened by Thaksin's "populist" redistributions, the middle class seemed less to reject democracy outright than to reinterpret it. In doing this, however, it eschewed the tenets of Asian democracy. Or rather, it reversed them, with the middle class ardently defending civil liberties, yet calling for the suspension of elections so that popularly elected governments could be replaced by an appointed "People's Council." But Thompson's essential point still stands: specifically, that democracy can effectively be weakened by redefining it. As Sinpeng explains, Thailand's middle class no longer understands democracy as popular sovereignty but rather in terms of "good and moral" appointments and policies, best guaranteed by royalist prerogatives. But in essence, it is difficult to think of a case in which the middle class has sought more artfully to avoid democracy by distorting its meaning.

What is more, even in cases where the middle class understands democracy in conventional ways and gathers in civil society organizations, its capacity to promote change may be undercut. Garry Rodan recounts that in Southeast Asia, capitalist development has contributed mightily to the activity of civil society. He refers specifically to a recent series of protests mounted by electoral reform groups in Malaysia, coalescing in a social movement known as Bersih (Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections). But Malaysia also exemplifies patterns of rigid ethnic identification that can inhibit NGOs from cooperating more effectively. Further, across Southeast Asia, civil society is cautioned by memories of Cold War repression. And it is weakened by oligarchs who ceaselessly innovate new strategies of fragmentation and containment. Meredith Weiss enumerates additional challenges in the region. She notes that civil society is hampered by ethnic rivalries, class tensions, and limits on formal "political space," but also by the cooptation of many NGOs by government agencies, rendering them politically neutral or even *uncivil* in character. She identifies the Village Scouts, a right-wing vigilante movement in Thailand, and Perkasa, a Malay nativist organization in Malaysia, as fearsome examples. Thus, in reflecting on civil society's impact on democratic change in the region, Weiss concludes that "Southeast Asian experience contradicts prevailing assumptions about the links between economic and political transformation" (p. 141).

Joel Selway examines ethnic identification more closely. And in elaborating different patterns, he notes that they are not equally damaging to democratic change, stability, and quality. To show this, he deploys dimensions of "fractionalization" (the number and relative size of ethnic groups) and crosscutting cleavages (based on religion, income, and geographic distribution). He argues

that where ethnic fractionalization is high, crosscut by religion, but geographically segmented, therein producing a mosaic social structure, it favors democratic stability. Within Southeast Asia, Indonesia best fulfills these requirements, recalling Horowitz's argument. By contrast, where fractionalization is low, producing a comparatively homogenous social structure, democratic change is impeded or, where it takes place, likely reversed. Among the four countries in Southeast Asia with the lowest levels of fractionalization, Selway observes that in two of them, Vietnam and Brunei, no democratic change has taken place. And in a second pair, Singapore and Cambodia, it has been rolled back. Selway also surveys more nuanced social structures. He contends that prospects for democracy in Myanmar are threatened because, while fractionalization and geographic segmentation are high, religious crosscutting is low, producing secessionist tensions. Democracy's prospects might seem even worse in Malaysia because fractionalization is high but religious cross-cutting and geographic segmentation are not, leaving sorely divided communities in direct and combustible contact. However, Selway also finds a partial remedy in Malaysia's institutions, with its electoral districting system sustaining some level of political competitiveness and spatial disaggregation.

Selway's account is striking, for plural societies have long been held to vitiate democratic stability (see Rabushka and Shepsle 1972). But in his analysis, the ethnicity with which Southeast Asia pulsates can in some configurations strengthen democracy. No exuberance, though, is warranted, for to work their positive effects, fractionalization and cleavages must intersect with a precision that only Indonesia seems able to attain. And even in this case, it was only after some 40 years of authoritarian rule that re-democratization started during the late 1990s. What is more, if Horowitz is right, the stability of Indonesia's new democracy comes at the cost of quality, challenging Selway's notion that they advance hand in hand. It may be too that institutions provide no lasting corrective. Though competitiveness may have increased in Malaysia's most recent general election, so too have authoritarian controls and ethnic hatreds in the wake of this contest.

In turning to Islam and democracy, Robert Hefner begins by exploring separatist tensions in Thailand and the Philippines. His account of these countries squares with Selway's findings that where religion reinforces rather than cuts across the grain of ethnic identification, it diminishes democracy's prospects. However, in Indonesia, where crosscutting is extensive, Hefner recalls that Muslim groups rallied in support of the transition to democracy during 1997–98. Furthermore, graduates of the country's leading Islamic universities today "have figured prominently among those who have succeeded in reassuring the Muslim electorate that Islam, democracy, and religious plurality are compatible" (p.179). But Hefner observes a darker side. He notes that after winning seats in the legislature, Muslim political parties seem no better able than Indonesia's secular vehicles to resist the allure of patronage, therein doing little to bolster democracy's quality. And some Muslim organizations that feature in the country's civil society, in their "harassment and occasional violence against Christians (especially Evangelicals), mystical sects, and [the country's] small Shi'a community" blemish Indonesia's democratic profile (p. 181). Even more worryingly, a radical "Islamist stream . . . has sought a revolutionary transformation of state and society" (p. 181).

Next, Susan Blackburn approaches social structures in Southeast Asia from the perspective of gender and women's interests. She begins by observing that women are hardly homogenous in their support of democratic change. And where such change takes place, any greater gender equality that might have been promoted by socialist groups may be lost. Women win no more ministerial positions or legislative seats than they did under prior authoritarian regimes. And though they may rise to the top to become national leaders in new democracies—as did Corazon Aquino and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo in the Philippines, Megawati Sukarnoputri in Indonesia,

and Yingluck Shinawatra in Thailand—they do so mainly because of their connections to male leaders. Further, apart from Aquino, they have undertaken few programs during their tenures that advanced women's interests. To be sure, women do enjoy greater associational life under democracy, enabling them to organize more freely. But even this fails to bring about major gains in equality. As Blackburn notes, for example, the middle class women who form NGOs are rarely interested in bettering the positions of their domestic helpers. And even when they more avidly pursue their own personal welfare in terms of political careers, non-discriminatory employment, and family planning, there is little evidence that governments grow any more responsive to their demands. Blackburn thus concludes that, so far at least, no clear pattern emerges between regime types and women's interests.

Finally, what might new media do to give new potency and direction to social forces? Jason Abbott argues that the Internet, especially when accessed through mobile telephony and augmented by social networking services like Facebook and Twitter, so confronts information control that that it is inherently democratizing. He observes too that that this extends even to developing countries as the ubiquity of mobile telephony has narrowed the digital divide. Indeed, Southeast Asia's average rate of Internet penetration is greater than that of Asia as a whole. In Singapore and Malaysia, 80 percent of the adult population possesses at least one smartphone. In Indonesia netizens display one of the world's highest rates of Facebook use. And their counterparts in the Philippines have one of the world's highest rates of text messaging.

Abbott recounts the ways in which the Internet and social networking cumulate in a “liberation technology”: organizing and coordinating political protest, videoing and documenting human rights abuses, and publicizing electoral fraud. But in elaborating three case studies from Southeast Asia, he finds the impact of new media to be mixed. In Myanmar, Internet activism was vigorous during the “Saffron Revolution” of 2007. But though it may have moderated government reprisals against protesters and invited international sanctions, no democratic transition took place. In Malaysia, opposition parties and civil society made use of news portals and political blogging to make great gains in the 2008 general election. But the government learned afterward how to respond effectively, mounting denial of service attacks and mounting defamation suits against opposition outlets. It has also mobilized pro-government bloggers and “cyber troopers,” including the 1Malaysia Social Media Volunteers and the Sensible and Ethical Malaysians United Troopers (Semut). Abbott thus estimates that in Malaysia's 2013 election, the warring between government and opposition which was played out over the Internet was fought to a standstill. Finally, in Thailand, after the coup in 2006, the government passed the Computer Crimes Act (2007), extending penalties for “content” offenses under the Thai penal code to cyber communications. On this score, the *lèse-majesté* law passed in 1957 was made far more stringent under the constitution adopted in 2007, declaring that “no person shall expose the king to any sort of accusation of action.” And the government now makes heavy use of crawler and filter technologies to expunge such content from the Internet and to expose its authors. For reinforcement, it has enlisted so-called Cyber Scouts who, in monitoring cyber communications, ensure “good moral use of technology.”

Abbott thus concludes on a cautious note. To be sure, new media greatly enhances information flows, enabling civil society to act collectively in ways that heretofore it could not. But even if inherently democratizing, by itself it does not ensure democratic change “any more than the development of the printing press, the telephone, or the television did in the past. The Internet and social networking services are no more than the latest form of communication technology” (p. 217). Abbott advises, then, that while spotlighting new media, we pay close attention to the historical and sociopolitical underpinnings of Internet activism.

Shaky institutions

Part 3 shifts from the social structures that might underpin democratic change to the institutions that may sustain it. Benjamin Reilly opens by noting that across Southeast Asia, consensus has been reached that strong governments and parties are necessary for making the developmental advances which, even more than democratic change, citizens demand (see Chu et al. 2008). Thus, among the region's new democracies, all save the Philippines have tried, irrespective of the electoral systems that they operate—whether plurality-based, proportional, or mixed—to impose thresholds that work majoritarian effects, therein nearly extinguishing small parties. But while threatening democracy's quality by constraining representativeness, efforts to forge strong parties have remained ambiguous. Reilly cites Indonesia's record in particular, noting that while many small parties have been shut out, the larger ones have failed to institutionalize their paramourcy. On this score, governments in the region that are freer to wield authoritarian controls have done more, installing single-party or single-party-dominant systems. But further, though well known for his study of institutional design, Reilly concludes that in Southeast Asia, electoral system “anomalies highlight again the divergence of Southeast Asian democracy in practice from the expectations of the political science literature” (p. 232).

Indeed, in elevating historical legacies and spatial proximity to determinative status, Reilly has lately argued that the strongest determinant of regime forms in Southeast Asia is proximity to China. In a twist on Levitsky and Way's (2010) notion of leverage and linkage to the West, Reilly contends that countries in mainland Southeast Asia that are closest to China operate authoritarian regimes. Those in more distal maritime Southeast Asia are freer to evolve along democratic or semi-democratic lines.

Allen Hicken and Erik Martinez Kuhonta extend the analysis of political parties. They argue that parties, in providing the public goods that show policy responsiveness to citizens and then offering the electoral mechanisms for accountability over performance, forge the “lynchpins of modern democracy” (p. 237). Accordingly, where we find stable party vehicles—or more broadly, stable party *systems*—measurable in terms of low electoral volatility, democracy is better able to survive. Thus, Hicken and Kuhonta never enter into debates over how the stability of a democracy might interact with quality, assuming, like Selway, that these dimensions go together: stable party systems produce democratic stability, policy responsiveness, and electoral accountability. Instead, they are concerned with the conditions in which stable party systems originate. And after examining a range of explanations, they plump for a surprising one: stable party systems, useful for stabilizing democratic regimes, derive from prior conditions of authoritarian rule. Thus, Hicken and Kuhonta reverse the first leg of a causal trajectory as it is conventionally understood. At the start, institutionalized party systems do not institutionalize democratic regimes. Rather, institutionalized authoritarian regimes must first institutionalize party systems. Accordingly, they reach the troubling conclusion that democracy “may emerge from the shell of undemocratic politics” (p. 246).

Hicken and Kuhonta's best examples in Southeast Asia are Singapore, with its authoritarian rule during the 1960s stabilizing a party system that centers on the PAP, and Malaysia, with its authoritarian rule during the 1970s stabilizing a party system that centers on the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). However, it is difficult to know whether their conclusion is fully borne out, for though Singapore and Malaysia may have gained stable party systems, they have yet to complete the next leg in the trajectory to stable democracy. Hicken and Kuhonta find firmer ground, though, when extending their analysis further afield to Japan, Taiwan, and Sri Lanka.

An array of other institutions, typically regarded as crucial for democracy's quality, are also examined in this volume. William Case turns to legislatures in Southeast Asia, gauging the extent

to which they are able to hold executives accountable. He too makes a disappointing finding, specifically, that legislatures are less intent on imposing accountability in new democracies than they are under electoral or competitive authoritarian regimes. To show this, he compares the performance of legislatures in Indonesia after 1999 and the Philippines under President Arroyo against that of legislatures in Malaysia and in Thailand during the shaky prime ministership of Yingluck Shinawatra. Their records show that governments operating new democracies in the region are so inclusionary in their allocations of ministerial positions and patronage that the opposition through which accountability might be imposed nearly melts from the scene. By contrast, governments operating electoral authoritarian regimes are more exclusionary, clinging so tightly to state positions and patronage that a strong opposition sets in. And in seeing no other route to the trove of patronage, the opposition is moved to impose accountability briskly in hopes of winning an election, democratizing the regime, and taking its place at the table. But finally, in making this argument, Case is alone in this volume in identifying freer markets as perhaps the means by which to imbue public institutions with more quality. He contends that when many persons find that they can better slake their ambitiousness in the world of business, those still seeking seats in legislative arenas may be more nobly incentivized.

Bjoern Dressel provides a slightly more uplifting account of judiciaries in the region. His assessment begins with Indonesia's Constitutional Court, inaugurated in 2003 as a key part of constitutional reform processes. Given powers of legislative review and presidential impeachment, as well as jurisdiction over party registration and electoral disputes, the Constitutional Court was regarded for a decade as effectively promoting rule of law. Hence, it seemed to break with the broader judiciary's patterns of notorious corruption—at least until the arrest of its chief justice on graft charges in 2013.

The failings of other judiciaries in Southeast Asia are more vivid. Highly politicized, courts throughout the region operate at the behest of the interests that overshadow them. On this score, Dressel regards the partisanship of the Constitutional Court in Thailand as among the region's most extreme, with the court bowing to Thaksin during his tenure and then cleaving to royalist elites after the coup in 2006. Indeed, availed of new powers to ban political parties under the constitution adopted in 2007, the court duly extinguished a series of successor parties linked to Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai. In the Philippines, the Supreme Court participated similarly in abetting the ouster of President Estrada. So, unlike legislatures that better impose accountability under electoral authoritarianism, judiciaries fail to do likewise. As Dressel recounts, the courts serve mostly as the tool of UMNO in political cases in Malaysia, and they stand coopted and "mute" in Singapore and Cambodia.

Natasha Hamilton-Hart, in tracking governance across the region, recounts additional ways in which new democracies fail to yield quality outcomes. Indeed, in some cases it can hardly be otherwise, for though governance, law, and democracy are typically "bundled" together as a policy objective by World Bank strategists, they are not necessarily mutually reinforcing. As Hamilton-Hart explains, while in some cases democratic change has encouraged accountable, rule-based governance, it is more often the case that "advances in democracy work at cross purposes with attempts to engineer advances in the rule of law and governance capacity" (p. 282). As we've seen, many contributors to this volume identify trade-offs between democracy's stability and quality. Hamilton-Hart agrees, observing that elites habitually "hijack" public policymaking, making this the price for their leaving democracy intact, but therein compromising severely the governance that results.

But more even than this, ordinary citizens may be uninterested in imposing accountability. As Hamilton-Hart observes, "electoral majorities do not necessarily want to hold government to the letter of the law" (p. 285). Citing new research from Garry Rodan and Caroline Hughes

(2014), she reports that citizens in many settings in Southeast Asia—though they may value sound policymaking—view “governments as accountable not to the electorate but to a higher moral authority, often religious” (p. 285). In other cases, calculations are more pedestrian, with citizens less interested in governance or accountability of any kind than in base patronage. In these circumstances, citizens long for rewards that parallel those of elites, though naturally are more modestly required. Accordingly, rather like legislatures that perform less well in new democracies than under electoral authoritarianism, Hamilton-Hart frankly concludes that, based on evidence from Southeast Asia, introducing democratic accountability mechanisms into government can impede the creation of effective, rule-based government organizations. On this count, Singapore thus stands out once again as an exemplar of how electoral authoritarian regimes can do better.

Edward Aspinall, in investigating the money politics that flourish in Southeast Asia, focuses more closely on the clientelism and patronage that persist even after democratic change takes place. Indeed, they are accelerated by electoral dealings, made manifest in vote buying, party machines, and the formation of ruling coalitions. Aspinall is careful to note that some of these exchanges are “functional,” helping forge links between political actors and societal supporters. But, he states, they more generally incur “destructive consequences,” in particular, the “corruption and other forms of predatory behaviour” (p. 307) that reduce the parties valorized by Hicken and Kuhonta and to mere clearinghouses of patronage, even if adorned with programmatic aims. At the same time, “bossism” grows entrenched at the subnational level. In this way, the policy coherence and resources essential for development are squandered.

At this point, in departing from some of his earlier writings, Aspinall comes close to arguing that after an initial period of trade-off, the terms are changed such that now all *bad* things go together. In brief, democracy's low quality carries over to corrode “faith in democracy itself,” (p. 308) therein chipping away steadily at stability. In addition, Aspinall agrees with Hamilton-Hart that this syndrome, though driven by politicians, is even more deeply and diabolically rooted. Poorer voters, especially in rural areas, insist on the patronage that slightly alleviates but substantially perpetuates the impoverished conditions in which they languish. Indeed, in Indonesia, Aspinall notes that such voters reject as “stingy” (*pelit*) those politicians who, in trying steadfastly to avoid money politics, refuse to dispense patronage. He thus concludes bleakly that the poverty and patronage in which Indonesia's society and new democracy are mired are “mutually reinforcing” (p. 309).

Finally, if electoral and party systems, legislatures, judiciaries, and sundry governance mechanisms fail in the Southeast Asian setting to substantiate democracy's stability, quality, or both, might the diminution of the military's role in politics provide greater encouragement? In a wide-ranging survey, Aurel Croissant observes that despite the democratic change that has taken place, civilian supremacy over the military is nowhere ironclad. Yet he is encouraged by Indonesia's record, where the president, ministers, and top bureaucrats have gained control over top military appointments, legislative recruitment, and broad security policy. Indeed, many analysts regard this as the most signal achievement of democratization in Indonesia. Even so, much of this preeminence is only informally institutionalized. Much depends, then, on the personal skills of the president in “co-opt[ing] the military leadership into his personal patronage and loyalty networks” (p. 327). But even where the president might achieve this, the military still operates a territorial command structure erected during the New Order era, amounting to a nationwide apparatus that shadows the state bureaucracy. And notwithstanding new regulations, the military continues to engage extensively in lucrative, often illegal business activities. Croissant thus describes civil-military relations in Indonesia as “promising,” but contends that “much remains to be done to fully subordinate the Indonesian military to civilian control” (p. 327).

Other country cases are yet more problematic. In the Philippines, top commanders do not seek to “rule, but neither do they act as ‘apolitical’ servants of the constitutional order” (p. 327). As we have seen, they connived to force out an elected president, though, for reasons that are doubly worrying, less to enhance their own power than to forestall a mid-level rebellion from within their own ranks. Still more nettlesome in Croissant’s estimation is Thailand, where the military looms as the “self-proclaimed guarding of king and nation” (p. 327). Thus, Croissant surmises, the Philippines and Thailand will probably be “plagued by further instances of military assertion and a lack of civilian control” (p. 327). And Myanmar, in the midst of an uncertain transition, remains still more vulnerable to the military’s interventions and mischief.

Croissant declines to trace in any systematic way the implications of lingering or resurgent military influence for democracy’s stability and quality. But he does consider briefly the comparative records of civil–military relations under single-party-dominant systems in Singapore, Malaysia, and Cambodia. And as with executive accountability imposed by legislatures in such cases of electoral authoritarianism, he finds the control over the military exercised by civilian politicians to be better institutionalized than in the region’s new democracies. And tighter still is the control displayed by single-party systems in Vietnam and Laos.

Divergent country cases

In the final section of this volume, seven country cases are canvassed. They include those in Southeast Asia with most democratic experience (the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia), two electoral or competitive authoritarian regimes that feature single-party-dominant systems (Singapore and Malaysia), one case of unsure transition (Myanmar), and a single-party system which, while liberalizing its markets and easing its ideological strictures, has stoutly resisted any democratization of politics (Vietnam).

Nathan Quimpo opens by analyzing the Philippines—the country with the most extensive record of political democracy in Southeast Asia, even if punctuated by Marcos’ executive coup and Estrada’s ouster. But after showing that democracy is no longer in danger of outright breakdown, Quimpo notes its scant quality, an assessment that is in keeping with the analyses of other contributors to this volume. Quimpo reminds us that the Philippines has long been beset by local strongmen and political clans. To better capture their statuses and relations, he draws upon new theorizing from Jeffrey Winters (2011), casting potentates as members of a “wild,” “armed,” and “warring oligarchy” which, especially in rural areas, is unique in the region for the prevalence and intensity of its political violence. Indeed, under the country’s democracy, oligarchs have flourished, reliably renewing their grip on power through the elections that they skew with clientelism and coercion, the latter applied roughly by use of goons and private armies. Quimpo thus fully agrees with Winters that democracy and oligarchy are “compatible.”

Elected presidents, then, have typically been helpless to contain these syndromes. Indeed, Quimpo recalls that during Arroyo’s 12 years in power, she came to depend on local oligarchs, allowing them to run free in their bailiwicks in return for their delivering up block votes of support for her own electoral bids. Thus, under democracy in the Philippines, only the skirmishing that sometimes erupts between clans has seemed even briefly to impede their rapaciousness. Authoritarian rule appears better able to “tame” oligarchs, with Marcos having used martial law to reconfigure the regime into a “sultanistic” one, therein concentrating clientelist and coercive resources in his own hands.

Yet Quimpo concludes on an unexpectedly positive note, arguing that current president Benigno Aquino has managed, despite democratic procedures, to trim back clientelism and patronage. As one example, Aquino abolished the discretionary allowances, known locally as

PDAF, that had long been issued to congressmen. Meant ostensibly to pursue local development projects, PDAF more obviously produced graft. But doubts still linger over Aquino's record. In bringing corruption charges against Arroyo, then purging the Supreme Court of the chief justice with whom she had been allied, Aquino has been suspected of carrying out the kind of vendetta in which warring oligarchs engage. And even if better motivated, Aquino's drive against corruption may amount to no more than a phase in what, citing Thompson (2010), has been identified as the country's perennial cycles "of populism, clientelism, and reformism" (p. 347). Quimpo's optimism is thus short-lived, for he laments that "Aquino III's reforms may not have lasting effects, especially since they do not really challenge the oligarchic elite's virtual stranglehold on wealth and power" (p. 347).

In Thailand, Federico Ferrara finds another lengthy record of democracy, with the country first holding elections in 1946. But its trajectory has oscillated even more rapidly than in the Philippines with "establishment" elites in the military and bureaucracy, their royalist partners either in the lead or in tow, episodically rolling democracy back or breaking it down. But in extending Aim Sinpeng's analysis, Ferrara notes that even after coups take place, ideologues who seek legitimacy try to cloak authoritarian rule in democratic garb. Of course, they denigrate the ways in which democracy is operated by civilian politicians, terming it "parliamentary dictatorship," "elected dictatorship," and "electocracy." However, while civilian politicians are besmirched, democracy is not; it is instead redefined, even in outlandish ways. Ferrara thus documents such shibboleths as "Thai-style Democracy," "Democracy with the King as Head of State," "statist democracy," and, most recently, "elite democracy."

But during Thaksin's tenure as prime minister, Thailand experienced more genuine democratic functioning. And just as Quimpo found a ray of light in the Philippines case, with Aquino perhaps trying to bolster rule of law, so does Ferrara see a glimmer in Thailand, with Thaksin having enhanced policy responsiveness. To be sure, Thaksin weakened horizontal accountability—eroding press freedoms, dominating parliament, and subverting the judiciary and independent watchdog agencies. But throughout his prime ministership, elections remained regular, free, and fair. And having responded to ordinary citizens with his famous healthcare program, a debt moratorium for farmers, and village development schemes, he was rewarded with successive popular mandates. Yet it was precisely because of this new level of responsiveness and the electoral victories that followed, effectively wresting away popular constituencies from the military, bureaucracy, and monarchy, that establishment elites reacted by mounting their coup. Ever since, Thaksin and his successors have been opposed by the Democratic Party, the country's oldest vehicle. But unable to win a popular majority through an election, the Democrats have pinned their hopes on military threats, judicial coups, and royalist street protests. Even more clearly than in the Philippines, then, gains in democracy's quality, by challenging steep social hierarchies, have undermined stability.

In the case of Indonesia, we have already seen how the trade-off that seems inherently to bedevil democracy's consolidation cuts in the other direction, with stability unthreatened by any serious gains in quality. But in a detailed and nuanced account, Marcus Mietzner extends discussion by recording the mixed legacies of President Yudhoyono's tenure. This tight focus on Yudhoyono's performance is justified, for it is during his presidency that Freedom House first evaluated Indonesia as "politically free," then later as only "partly free." Like Aspinall, Mietzner believes that Yudhoyono's most signal achievement was to have deepened civilian control over the military, rendering it the strongest it has been in Indonesia since 1945. In particular, Yudhoyono fired "the most conservative generals" and took charge of the promotions process, warning officers that those who undermined the government's credibility by speaking openly to the media would not be considered for advancement. In consequence, their "ultranationalist,

often hyperbolic commentary . . . on political affairs almost completely disappeared” (p. 374). Even so, Mietzner reminds us that the military’s regional command structure, its sundry rackets, and its array of institutes and foundations mostly persist, for civil-relations have mostly been adjusted through Yudhoyono’s personal networks rather than through institutionalized controls. And hence, even to the extent that gains have been made, it is unclear whether they might fully be perpetuated by his successor Joko Widodo, who possesses no military background.

Another advance in democracy’s stabilization lies in Yudhoyono’s confirming elections as the sole mechanism for the renewal and transfer of executive power. But in Mietzner’s interpretation, this was mostly to “bed down” the electoral reforms that had been made by his predecessor Megawati Sukarnoputri. And if it was during Megawati’s tenure that direct elections were extended to the provincial and district levels, Mietzner points out that it was one of Yudhoyono’s most influential ministers who called ominously for the abolition of contestation for regents and mayors.

Thus, under Yudhoyono, democracy’s stability was modestly advanced, with gains made in civilian hegemony and electoral functioning. But even if only strengthened incrementally, stability lasted for, if anything, the progress of quality was even more scant. For example, the country’s vigorous anticorruption commission continued to operate, notwithstanding repeated threats from the legislators who so often felt its heat. But corruption still flourished among legislators, especially in connection with campaign finance. With the government having nearly terminated public funding for campaigning, party leaders have relentlessly pressed legislators to generate revenues, which the latter mostly obtain as kickbacks in return for issuing state contracts and licenses or for obliging regulation. Further, as Mietzner dryly adds, Yudhoyono’s own Democratic Party, once so celebrated for its reformist commitments, became the gravest offender. Finally, on a societal plane, the ethnic violence and separatist movements that flared early in Indonesia’s democratic transition period across Aceh, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Maluku, and Papua have nearly been brought to a halt. Yet for fear of antagonizing Islamist figures, Yudhoyono has refused to act against religious intolerance, leaving Christian, Ahmadiyah, and Shi’a minorities vulnerable to intimidation and violence. Hence, on a variety of levels, Mietzner makes clear that Indonesia illustrates well the trade-offs, conundrums, dilemmas, and fluctuations that can afflict trajectories of democratic change.

Contributors to this volume next address country cases where democratization remains uncertain or thwarted. These accounts are instructive, for they make even plainer the obstacles that still bristle in Southeast Asia. Among our two cases of single-party dominance, Stephan Ortmann argues that Singapore is perhaps most poised for change. In his view, with the opposition having won a Group Representation Constituency in the 2011 general election, earning it an unprecedented number of legislative seats, Singapore has transited from an electoral authoritarian regime to a finer subset of *competitive* authoritarianism. Accordingly, despite the continuing unevenness of the playing field, the opposition’s winning an election outright is now imaginable.

Ortmann attributes this new scenario to standard modernizing pressures that finally transformed societal outlooks in Singapore in ways that had long been anticipated but remained obstructed, owing mostly to widespread satisfaction over the PAP government’s economic management as well as trepidation about the country’s minute size and strategic vulnerabilities. But discontents have lately been ignited by surges in skilled and unskilled in-migrants, rocketing living costs, and yawning disparities in life chances. In rough correspondence, the opposition has attracted talented candidates. More than drawing protest voters, then, the opposition is able now to pose more persuasively as an alternative to the PAP. Ortmann also believes that the liberalizing concessions with which the PAP has responded, far from quelling discontents, encourage

demands for more. And with far greater certainty than Abbott, Ortmann regards the Internet as a “game changer” (p. 390), with opposition parties and civil society organizations able to ignore the mainstream media in their search for support.

Even so, we must remain guarded about democratic change in Singapore and the opposition's advance. Despite the depth of discontent, the PAP's resilience is shown by its losing only 5 of parliament's 88 seats in the last election. Its nimbleness in policymaking is displayed by its promise to middle- and working-class voters to scale down the numbers of migrants who displace them. And its willingness to turn back the clock from competitive to electoral authoritarianism is revealed by its reactivation of controls on the Internet. Thus, for some time still, Singapore seems destined to remain a thorn in the side of modernization theorists.

The Malaysian case is yet more problematic. In a general election held in 2008, the opposition made stunning gains, prompting many activists to hail the arrival of a two-party system. In this new configuration, the ruling Barisan Nasional, centering on UMNO, stood toe to toe with Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance), led by the former deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim. Activists looked forward, then, to the opposition's winning the next election outright, finally overturning the single-party-dominant system through a process of democratization by election. However, when the election was held in 2013, though Pakatan won a majority of the popular vote, Barisan clung to power. As James Chin recounts, the Election Commission (EC) had so manipulated electoral districting through gerrymandering and malapportionment that UMNO was able still to lead its coalition to claim most of the seats in parliament.

In Malaysia, the EC makes no pretense over its neutrality. Chin cites the views of EC officials who plainly regard the commission as “part of the government's machinery” (p. 401). He also quotes Shahidan Kassim, a minister in the Prime Minister's Department—the agency to which, rather than parliament, the EC is responsible. Shahidan has lent sanction to the EC's gross malapportionment, for as he once remarked during parliamentary question time, “one person one vote” does not amount to electoral fairness. Nor in the opinion of Shahidan does the competitiveness of the party system produce fairness, for it divides “indigenous” Malay constituencies while overrepresenting Chinese politicians in parliament. Shahidan thus counsels that the party system should be reduced to just three parties, one for each of the country's major ethnic communities, the Malays, the Chinese, and the Indians. In this way, with the Malays more single-mindedly voting for UMNO, “the number of MPs from each race will correctly represent the racial demographic of Malaysia. Instead, right now, we have 23 percent Chinese in Malaysia, but 40 Chinese MPs out of 222 MPs in parliament” (cited on p. 402).

As Chin laments, strong ethnic identities and tensions form the core of political life in Malaysia today. Notions of Malay special rights and Islamic supremacy have sunk deep roots across large sections of the Malay community, especially in rural areas, helping underpin UMNO's dominance. Hence, even where the government fails to win popular majorities, it can count on intense social support for its electoral manipulations, then modulate coercion to make up for shortfalls. Anxiety is deep-seated within the Malay community over the impact of democratic change on its social entitlements. And with democracy's worth so in doubt, Chin sees no prospect in Malaysia for more than pseudo-democracy anytime soon. Indeed, it may even be that the opposition, by steadily making electoral headway, only intensifies support for the government's rolling back of democracy.

In these circumstances, it might appear that democratic change has gained more steam in Myanmar than in Malaysia. And indeed, Renaud Egretreau agrees that in Myanmar since 2011, many “startling reforms” have been adopted. But in recalling the “discipline-flourishing democracy” that the ruling State Peace and Development Council once sought, which echo the interpretations made by “establishment” elites in Thailand, Egretreau reminds us also of the

distorted ways in which democracy may still be conceptualized by Myanmar's government today. He warns too that the country's transition has been top-down in nature, extending the government's grip on its pace and extent. What is more, the government was only encouraged to initiate the transition by a kind of linkage and leverage that may soon be spent. In brief, more than by any elite-level splits or societal pressures, the government has been driven by resentments over China's market penetration, abetted by international sanctions. But after sanctions have been eased and investment sunk, the government may soon lose its appetite for continuing democratic change.

Further, as Egreteau recounts, the centrality in Myanmar of personalist charisma and clientelist relations, the extent of the country's poverty, and the intensity of its fraught communalism, separatism, and strategic complexity militate strongly against democratic change. In addition, even such change as has taken place may be more ascribable to the intrinsic weaknesses of military government as a regime type, at long last made manifest in the Myanmar case, than to any more positive drivers. As such, it will likely be some time before we need fret over how stability is challenged by advances in quality.

Finally, in turning from single-party-dominant systems and former military governments, Benedict Kerkvliet focuses on the single-party system in Vietnam. Despite this country's apparent imperviousness to democratic change, it deserves inclusion in this volume. As Kerkvliet advises, a steep erosion in Marxian legitimacy and a commensurate rise in associational activity contribute moderately to Southeast Asia's cumulative, though viscous movement toward democracy. However, as Kerkvliet quickly observes, more crucial factors in the Vietnam case are missing. We encounter no inviting elite-level splits, no impatient middle class, or any insistent formations of industrial workers.

Elites in Vietnam's Communist Party permit multi-candidate elections for the national assembly. But they prohibit any multi-partism which, in fueling the vehicles of others, would detract from their own. Accordingly, candidates may stand independently. But even though vetted by the Communist Party, their prospects remain thin. Moreover, the middle class remains at ease with these uncompetitive terms, reveling in the statuses and living standards which, in their novelty, it does not yet take for granted. Indeed, as Kerkvliet reports, many middle-class Vietnamese still seek membership in the party, though less to imbibe its fortifying tonics than to access its skyward connections. To be sure, a notion of democracy is venerated in Vietnam. But seemingly, even without the prompting of elites, this is mainly understood by the middle class in terms of its own rising prosperity. Kerkvliet thus concludes that while Vietnam bears watching, its "political system is unlikely to change soon to a procedural democracy" (p. 437).

Conclusions

As the contributors to this volume make clear, democracy has legs in Southeast Asia but its footing is unsure. A central theme thus takes shape. Where democratic change unfolds in the region, it is usually fragile and ever vulnerable to a rollback at varying pace or even stark breakdown. But more insidiously, even where democracy stabilizes, this comes at the cost of quality, therein stunting rule of law, policy responsiveness, executive accountability, and the like. Social forces may drive democratic transitions in Southeast Asia through popular upsurge or concerted patterns of voting. But resurgent elites, never quite dislodged, may reply with authoritarian backlash, unless their "inviolable interests" (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986: 69) remain untrammelled.

Thus, by presenting data and interpretations from Southeast Asia, this volume contributes on two counts to the debates that still flourish over democratic change. It canvases comprehensively the value systems, transitional processes, social structures, and institutions by which

democratization in the region has been impeded or advanced. But further, where democratization has gone forward, it gauges the tense interplay between stability and quality. It therein provides some account too for democracy's destabilization, made manifest in rollback or breakdown, or its failure to attain quality, leaving rule of law, responsiveness, and accountability truncated. Indeed, many of the authors in this volume hint at or even identify explicitly a trade-off. As one example, democracy broke down in Thailand when policy responsiveness grew so great that Thaksin's government threatened the hegemony of rival establishment elites. Democracy persisted in Indonesia where rule of law and accountability remained so weak that the interests of collusive elites were left undisturbed.

But more recently, the Indonesia case underscores the insidious terms of trade-off in another way. As quality has risen—with the anticorruption commission investigating corrupt legislators, local elections promoting accountability and competitiveness among parties, and civil society organizations engaging in ever more vigorous participation—democracy has correspondingly been mildly destabilized. Indonesia's democracy has hardly suffered the crushing breakdown that was visited upon Thailand's. But the new regulations that impinge on civil liberties and the abolition of local elections signal clearly that some rollback, though unclear in extent and duration, is underway. Indeed, we are reminded that Freedom House advises that Indonesia has even ceased to be politically “free.”

In making these arguments, most of the contributors to this volume spend little time in rehearsing debates over how political democracy is best defined. But in Sorpong Peou's chapter on human rights, a minimal or procedural understanding is usefully recalled, one with which most of the contributors would agree. In this conceptualization, democracy demands no more than that Dahl's (1972) twin polyarchic dimensions of liberal participation and electoral contestation be fulfilled. But where we find anything less, with either or both of these dimensions seriously impaired or missing, the regime must be understood as slumping into some form of authoritarianism—consisting, in the world today, mostly of hybrid subtypes but also, more archaically in Southeast Asia, of the dry residues of single-party systems and absolute monarchy. On the other hand, if more than civil liberties and competitive elections are present, democracy blooms with quality, attaining the party competitiveness that encourages responsiveness, the judicial independence that impedes executive abuses, the frameworks of regulatory competence that insure good governance, and the representativeness that safeguards women and social minorities.

As such, the claims of contributors are gathered in this book, sometimes implicit, at other times more robustly articulated, over how democracy is most fruitfully conceptualized. They trace clear pathways along which democracy is waylaid or achieved. Further, where democracy is reached, they enumerate causes and specify thresholds for its rollback, breakdown, or persistence. And where democracy endures, they demonstrate the meager quality upon which, distressingly, it seems to depend. But most distinctively, these claims are made in the context of Southeast Asia, an analytically vivacious part of the world with which generalists too seldom engage. Though Southeast Asia's citizens may not all move at once with democratizing rhythm, they are greater in their numbers than Latin America's, however constructed, artificial, exotic, or peripheral their region is thought sometimes to be.

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Dead idea (still) walking

The legacy of the “Asian democracy” and “Asian values” debate

Mark R. Thompson

Why resuscitate an apparently mortally wounded debate about “Asian democracy” (or, more precisely, how “Asian values” make “Western-style democracy” a culturally inappropriate regime form)? This discourse made only a brief political appearance in Southeast Asia (touted in particular by the Singapore school) in the mid-1990s and then disappeared, seemingly unmourned, after the Asian financial crisis of 1997–8. Some Western commentators and even politicians had treated seriously these political claims that cultural differences justified political authoritarianism because they saw the argument linked to the region’s rapid economic growth. For example, then Conservative Party chairman David Howell called on Britain to adopt some of the values underlying Asia’s economic success (cited in Robinson 1996). Former prime minister Edward Heath, in a debate with Martin Lee, a leading Hong Kong democrat, defended “Asian values,” claiming that the “Asiatic countries have a very different view” of democracy (cited in Mallet 1999: 54). In a neo-Weberian vein, Confucian traditions were seen to have provided a favorable cultural context for financial success. But when the Asian economic “miracle” proved to have been but a mirage, many Western observers reversed themselves, instead blaming Asian values for the cronyism they claimed underlay the financial meltdown (Wade 1998).

Asian values can be understood as a culturalist discourse that claims that individualist, competitive Western-style liberal democracy is inappropriate in more collectivist and consensual Asian societies. It is not a claim “about the absoluteness of Asian values, but about their appropriateness given the circumstances in which Asian societies exist” (Connors 2012: 264). It is particularistic in that it asserts that the national culture is unique, incomparable with any other and not subject to universalist (read “Western”) norms.

There are surprisingly plausible reasons to offer intellectual life support to this claim that in Asia there is more emphasis on the common good and political consensus than in highly individualistic and competitive Western political systems. The main justification is that this discourse never died out in Asia itself. It was dismissed by international observers after the Asian economic crisis in 1997–8. But this high-handedness was itself undermined by the near collapse of the Western financial system triggered by the Lehman collapse in 2008. Blaming economic downturns in Asia and other emerging markets “on ‘crony capitalism’ and other such supposed cultural defects” no longer works now that “the global financial system has devastated all the

‘advanced’ economies as well,” revealing a discredited doctrine of excessive financial liberalization to be the real culprit (Pais 2013).

Instead of disappearing, claims about a distinct form of Asian democracy were transformed. Stung by the claim that Asian values were the cause of the economic crisis, the Singapore school began arguing that Confucian virtues of “disciplined” government underlay “good governance” in Singapore (Teehankee 2007). Moreover, Singapore’s official narrative of value-based, meritocratic governance in Singapore has strongly influenced China’s own process of “political learning.” China has experienced a bottom-up revival of neo-Confucianism, some versions of which use culturalist arguments to rule out Western democracy. This is clearly one of the most important legacies of the Asian values debate.

Claims that culture underpinned “good governance” have also surfaced in a “civil society” context during militant royalist protests against pro-Thaksin governments in Thailand during that country’s ongoing political unrest, which has gone on since 2005. Furthermore, a culturalist discourse of good governance and non-interference was regionalized by the then largely authoritarian Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). “The philosophy of Asian values and the 1997–8 Asian economic crisis stimulated the creation of the ASEAN [the ten member Association of Southeast Asian Nations] +3” and will continue “to influence the ASEAN+3 in the future” (Dzulkarnain 2003: 7).

Finally, arguments about the cultural relativity of human rights and democracy have spurred a reaction among dissidents in several Southeast Asian nations, leading them to make arguments *in favor* of universalist principles of democracy framed in culturalist terms. This dialectical development points to the often unnoticed complexity behind discussions of Asian democracy. Its origins were as a reaction to a “hegemonic” imposition of Western political values on Asia. But this, in turn, provoked a backlash of its own within Asia by oppositionists, such as Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma/Myanmar or Anwar Ibrahim in Malaysia, who use religious traditions as an argument to promote human rights and liberal democracy.

This chapter begins with a brief look at the genesis of the Asian values discourse before turning to the short-lived international debate about it. This discourse first entered the world stage when advocated by pro-government elites justifying continued electoral authoritarianism in Singapore and Malaysia in the late 1980s/early 1990s. The chapter then examines the shift to an emphasis on culturalist-based “good governance” in Singapore after the Asian values debate appeared to be discredited internationally. It next turns to how Singapore’s culturalist defense of authoritarianism has become a “model” for China which has developed a variant of the Asian democracy debate of its own, based around neo-Confucianism. The following section examines how a pro-royalist, anti-Thaksin civil society has used a cultural discourse of Thainess to discredit electoralism. The regional impact of this discourse in the ASEAN community is demonstrated by looking at that organization’s recent declaration on human rights. Finally, the counterarguments of culturalist-but-universalist “Asian democrats” are considered.

The genesis and historical background of the debate

The debate about whether Asian values made Western democracy irrelevant or even harmful to regimes in the region “sprang fully formed onto the international stage” (Barr 2000: 309) in a famous interview with Lee Kuan Yew by Fareed Zakaria, published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1994 (Zakaria 1994).¹ Lee’s position was subsequently seconded by a number of “official government scribes” (Buruma 1999), most notably Kishore Mahbubani, Tommy Koh, and Bilahari Kausikan, often referred to collectively as “the Singapore school.” It also received unexpected backing from then Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (making it perhaps the only high-profile

issue on which he and Lee seemed to agree). Mahathir's contribution to the debate is often overshadowed by Lee's. But an important contribution of the Malaysian prime minister was to keep the emphasis on transnational "Asian" political values, rather than Confucian mores which Lee Kuan Yew always insisted was what the discussion was really about (Barr 2000). As prime minister of multiethnic Malaysia heading a party (the United Malays National Organization) that positions itself as a proponent of Malay interests, Mahathir created the "Asian" in the Asian democracy debate for obvious ethnic considerations.

In his analysis of Lee's contribution to the debate, Michael Barr points out that Lee was rearticulating positions he had held since the 1950s which were strengthened by his abhorrence for the "atomistic libertarianism" that emerged from the countercultural movement of the 1960s and 1970s (2000: 310). This discourse emerged in a post-Cold War context when Western powers and their agencies seemed intent on imposing their views of human rights and democratic values on countries like Singapore (Wang 2003; Connors 2012). During the Cold War, key Asian states were dictatorships allied with the US (such as the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan) which made it difficult to press an agenda of respect for civil liberties and democratization too hard. After the end of the Cold War, such restraints loosened. This helps explain why Lee found the early 1990s the right moment to confront Western intellectuals and policymakers with his long-held contrarian, culturalist views. Summing up the argument, Kishore Mahbubani argues that "the aggressive Western promotion of democracy, human rights and freedom of the press to the Third World at the end of the Cold War was, and is, a colossal mistake" (Mahbubani 1998, quoted in Emmerson 2013: 166).

Barr (2000: 312) argues that decades before the beginning of the Asian values debate in the early 1990s, Lee Kuan Yew had been calling "for a paternalistic, illiberal state which is presumed to be strong and stable. . . . [and] a legitimate, if not superior, alternative theory of government." Lee sees citizens as part of culturally conditioned "herd" to be led by wise leaders (Barr 2000: 316).

More specifically, Michael Connors points out that there were growing pressures for democratization in the countries where the leading advocates for Asian values emerged: Singapore and Malaysia (Connors 2012). In Singapore, the once unrepresented opposition finally won a seat in parliament in the early 1980s, and the dominant People's Action Party (PAP) had been losing electoral ground steadily since. In Malaysia, the United Malays Nationalist Organization (UMNO), the leading party in the ruling National Front coalition, had split in the mid-1980s and Mahathir's own position as Prime Minister, at one point, seemed threatened. One strategy of counter-attack that was adopted was to blame domestic pressures for democratization on international jealousy of Asia's financial success. This was a view particularly associated with Malaysia's Mahathir (Connors 2012).

The key premise in establishing that there is a distinct form of Asian democracy is cultural relativism (Barr 2000). Norms proposed as universal, particularly those related to human rights, are, upon closer examination, actually Western in origin and applicability. Asia is different from the West because of its different history and cultural background. Supposedly universalistic norms turn out to be an attempt to impose Western culture on non-Western regions such as Asia, which is why the effort to establish a culturally appropriate form of rule (Asian democracy) is so important.

The Asian democracy discourse can be best summed up as a series of dichotomies: cultural particularism versus universalism; the nation-cum-family versus individualism; social and economic rights versus political rights; and non-interference in a country's domestic affairs versus the enforcement of international norms (Hoon 2004).

Jeffrey Herf (1984) argues that such dichotomies were particularly prominent among late nineteenth-century German thinkers concerned about distinguishing collective, hierarchical

German culture from individualistic libertarian French civilization. Conservative proponents of German “culture” versus French “civilization” rejected what they claimed was an attempt to impose supposedly universalistic values on Germany (Thompson 2000). By not democratizing despite economic development, Germany had followed a different “path” from not just France but also Britain and the US, something German ideologues in Imperial Germany were keenly aware of and emphasized as a virtue rather than as a deficiency in their country’s modernization. The *Sonderweg* (special or separate path) was widely considered by historians to be a key factor in Germany’s “revolution from above” (Moore 1966) and a reason for the Nazis’ rise to power (Smith 2008). By distinguishing between Western civilization and German *Kultur*, ideologists were able to claim that, for Germany, industrialization ought not to lead to democratization, for democracy was alien to German culture.

The Imperial German critique of Western civilization helps us to better understand Asian values by showing that the real issue involved is not “Asia” versus the “West,” but rather authoritarian versus democratic modernity. Imperial Germany was a European country whose ideologues denied that it belonged to Western civilization. But this claim to cultural difference merely covered over a deeper dispute about the way in which the modern world should be constructed. Conservative thinkers in Imperial Germany, like today’s Asian values advocates, tried to prove that authoritarianism could go hand in hand with an advanced form of modern living. In Meiji Japan, which at the outset of its modernization project had opted for a “German” path of authoritarian modernization after studying various Western models (Martin 1995), it was common to stress values indigenous to Toyo (Eastern Ocean) and to reject Seiyo (Western Ocean) norms. In this sense, advocates of Asian values are drawing on a familiar authoritarian culturalist repertoire when denouncing Western norms as being inappropriate in a modernizing Asian context (Wang 2003). This has led Jayasuriya to compare the Asian values debate with Jeffrey Herf’s description of Imperial Germany’s “reactionary modernism” (Jayasuriya 1998; Herf 1984).

A short-lived international discussion

The Asian values debate made a brief appearance on the international stage (more specifically on the page of leading journals such as *Foreign Policy*, the *Journal of Democracy*, *Foreign Affairs*, and *Foreign Policy*). This debate received international attention because the assertion that Asian cultural particularity justified the rejection of liberal democracy was matched by impressive economic results. Culturalist arguments by dictators in developing countries suffering from severe economic mismanagement (such as the assertion of “African traditions” as justification for nondemocratic rule in much of sub-Saharan Africa in the 1970s and 1980s) received little international attention due to obvious developmental failings. In Southeast Asia, by contrast, three decades as the world’s fastest-growing region made the “Asian challenge” much more interesting than anti-Western positions of the past. “Asian authoritarians,” *The Economist* wrote in 1992, “argue from a position of economic and social success.”

The 1997–8 Asian financial crisis in the region undermined the international standing of Asian democracy/Asian values. The reason was that culturalist arguments had been used not just to explain the distinct form of Asian democracy but also to give a neo-Weberian spin to the region’s rapid economic growth in the three decades preceding the crisis. Economists who had claimed that a Confucian ethos promoted capitalist growth in Asia as the Protestant ethic had done in the West (an inversion of Max Weber’s thesis that Confucianism was an obstacle to economic development) found themselves without an Asian economic miracle to explain. The senior Singaporean government official Tommy Koh, put on the defensive by a crisis that many

attributed to “cronism,” no longer attempted to convince an international audience of the merits of Asian values; in a piece in the *International Herald Tribune*, he merely tried to convince readers that they were not to *blame* for the recent economic downturn (Koh 1997).

But in reality, the chief aim of the Asian values discourse had always been political—to fend off liberalizing demands in the name of safeguarding government efficiency. Asian democracy was championed by Westernized officials in Singapore and Malaysia at a time when pro-democracy movements in both countries were challenging electoral authoritarian rule. In Singapore, the ruling People’s Action Party’s (PAP’s) share of the vote fell nearly 20 percent between the 1980 and 1991 elections. In this context, Singapore’s prime minister, Goh Chok Tong, decried Western democracy, a free press, foreign television, and pop music “which could bring the country down” (*The Economist* 1994). As an antidote to all that was wrong with Westernization—rising crime and divorce rates—as well as the decadence of popular music, television, and film—an Asian values discourse could be used to justify both the draconian laws regarding personal behavior and the crackdown on political opposition which the PAP had undertaken in the late 1980s. It had created an ideology to combat both individualism and democratic tendencies. At about the same time in Malaysia, Prime Minister Mahathir defended Asian notions of governance and accused the West of “ramming an arbitrary version of democracy” down the country’s throat (Vatikiotis 1992: 17). Similar to the PAP’s argument in Singapore, the Malaysian government used such culturalism to discredit demands for liberal democracy and individualism.

From “Asian values” to “good governance”

As we have seen, the Asian crisis brought three decades of rapid economic growth to an abrupt halt and seemingly discredited the Asian values discourse thought to explain it. Malaysia faced both financial crisis and democratic challenges, while Singapore was able to contain both the financial fallout (quickly resuming economic growth after a dramatic fall in GDP) and potential opposition arising out of it. An international discourse of “good governance” emerged as the chief antidote to the crisis. But this did not serve to boost the fortunes of liberal democracy in East Asia (Thompson 2004). Julio Teehankee (2007) argues that nondemocratic regimes like Singapore’s adopted the concept of good governance as “a new legitimizing tool to justify ‘Asian values.’”

Asking “what is the political content of good governance,” Nanda (2006: 271) argues there is no clear answer as liberal democratic values are not necessarily a part of it. Some form of accountability is required, but not necessarily through democratic rule. Since there is no real agreement on how “good governance” should be defined much less measured and its relation to democracy is unclear, it has proved relatively easy for antidemocratic forces to make this discourse their own. Teehankee argues that although “none of the current leaders in Singapore and Malaysia mention the ‘Asian values’ concept in their policy pronouncements” anymore, in the form of a discussion of economic and political “governance” appropriate to Southeast Asia, “it continues to permeate the intellectual and ideological discourse in these countries” (Teehankee 2007). Daniel Bell (2013: 3) has recently pointed to Lee Kuan Yew’s emphasis on “meritocracy” as the basis of good governance. By doing so, Lee has attempted to drive a wedge between a neo-Aristotelian cross-tabulation of “good” democratic and “bad” authoritarian rule, as authoritarian regimes (and above all Singapore’s) had proven that they can be well governed.

One way Lee that attempted to prove his argument was by pointing to the opposite: poorly governed democracies. In 1992, he famously admonished Filipino business leaders in Manila that in order to develop the country needed “discipline rather than democracy.”² After the Asian financial crisis Lee suggested: “the solution to Asia’s economic problems did not lie in greater

democracy, but in ‘good governance,’ including ‘sound banking laws, rigorous supervision in the financial sector, and proper corporate governance’” (cited in Acharya 1999: 422). While acknowledging that corruption and cronyism did plague many Asian countries, Tommy Koh, then director of the Singapore Institute for Policy Studies, argued: “some Confucianist or Asian values are good values. They have survived the economic crisis and will continue to serve East Asia well” (Koh 2001: 3). He elaborated that through belief in marriage and strong families, Asian societies have avoided the social breakdown plaguing the US and other Western countries. Further, the “reverence for education and learning” has led Asian students to outperform “their Western counterparts in international tests of mathematics and science.” A strong work ethic gives Asia “an edge in the global competition” (ibid.: 4). As a whole, Asian values promote good governance when wise leaders guide a highly educated and motivated society that is not facing social breakdown and which emphasizes cooperation rather than conflict.

“Confucian values” in China

It is striking that a neo-Confucian discourse emerged in China in 1978 (after suffering bitter attacks in the Mao years) with the Symposium on Confucianism at Shandong University, the same year that Deng Xiaoping launched his economic reforms (Berger 2004). This “Confucian turn” was clearly influenced by Singapore’s authoritarian culturalism. Lee Kuan Yew was appointed honorary chairman of the China-sponsored International Confucius Association in 1994. In the meantime, Lee had befriended Deng when he visited China in 1979, offering advice on China’s authoritarian development which helped ignite “Singapore fever” in China (Peh 2009).

Based on the assumptions of cultural uniqueness, many Chinese authors writing about Singapore consider the city-state’s political system and its record of “good governance” to be a regime form more suitable for China than the Western model of a market economy and liberal democracy. Since Singapore’s population is mainly ethnic Chinese, these scholars consider Singapore to be the country most culturally similar to China, sharing with the mainland authoritarian Asian values which are inborn and unchangeable (Jiang 2006; Li 1997).³ Following arguments of Lee Kuan Yew, they deny the universal applicability of liberalism, considering it unsuitable not only during the developmental process but even when the country is fully modernized. Asian countries will always depend on the strong rule of small elites and restrict the freedoms of their citizens in the interest of economic growth and political stability. Instead of checks and balances and multiparty democracy, the Asian form of democracy emphasizes a strong government with values shaped by moral leadership and a society subjugated to national concerns. Political opposition is seen as detrimental to the state and society (Lai 2007). For authoritarianism to be truly effective, leaders need to act in the interest of the people, which can be accomplished through the reinforcement of Confucian values.

For this reason, Chinese scholars have paid particular attention to the institutionalization of these values. Thus, the Singaporean government’s decision to enact the so-called “Shared Values” in law in 1991 is seen as a milestone in the island state’s development toward greater responsiveness. These values are largely based on a neo-traditionalist interpretation of Confucianism and thus emphasize the group over the individual, reinforce the understanding of the family as the key building block of society, incorporate a paternalist understanding of individual rights, and promote the idea of consensus instead of conflict, therein promoting ethnic and religious harmony (Clammer 1993). The key focus of the values is a hierarchical understanding of society coupled with a lack of contentious politics. In essence, they suggest the need for a strong government capable of forging a consensus and deciding upon the best interests of society. This has

struck a chord with many Chinese scholars and politicians, who believe in the need of a ruling party to guide the “ignorant masses.” As a consequence, many scholars now advocate emphasizing Confucianism in Chinese schools. With the decline of communism as a guiding ideology, there has been a government-sponsored effort to revive Confucianism, an undertaking enthusiastically supported by many intellectuals (Fan 2012; Bell 2010). The hope is that the return of this traditional thought with its emphasis on hierarchy will enhance the obedience of the people to the government and avert the desire for more individualist values such as those found in liberal democracy (Carr 2006).

By reforming one-party rule in China, conservative reformers believe that the regime can become more stable and resilient through the adaptation of Confucian-influenced principles of good governance. A key lesson Singapore can teach China is the need to construct an ideological and moral defense against graft (Wei 2004). In this Confucian view, subjects will follow leaders only if the latter set a good example. Moral leadership of the ruling elite is the crucial condition for good governance, making it more important than institutional checks and balances, often derided by Chinese scholars as a Western and consequently alien concept. Zhou Bibo (2005) contends the most important lesson of the PAP’s experience is that the fate of the country depends on whether the party in power is morally good or bad. Chinese observers see meritocracy as one of the key legitimating ideologies of the Singaporean regime. For instance, instead of focusing on democracy, Singapore is the archetype of the meritocracy that Pan Wei (1998, 2009) envisions for China: a country ruled by a government entirely dedicated to serve the welfare of the people and maintain the harmony of the entire society.

The significance of the Chinese interest in developing a culturalist justification for non-democratic rule is that it is part of the ideological struggle for China’s soul (Thompson 2001). This battle is complicated by the fact that a Maoist faction of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continues to resist the introduction of Confucianism into broader Chinese society (as symbolized by the mysterious night time removal of a large statue of Confucius near Tiananmen Square in April 2011; Jacobs 2011). But Pan Qin (2013) has suggested that while powerful factions in the central state have resisted “Confucianizing” the CCP, local governments acting as “ideological reformers” have moved to co-opt it in order to strengthen the local party’s legitimacy.

“Asian democracy” in Thai civil society

Although most Western commentators believed that claims about distinctive Asian cultural values had been discredited by the Asian financial crisis, as we have seen, the “Asian democracy” discourse was in fact transformed into a “good governance” narrative that proved influential in China and encouraged some intellectuals to press for a revival of Confucianism as an authoritarian ideology. Not surprisingly, an “Asian values” rejection of “Western democracy” was continued by highly authoritarian regimes such as the military regime in Burma/Myanmar after 1988 (Houtman 1999). More unexpected was the persistence of Asian democracy-style arguments in Thailand, even in civil society groups which are normally associated with the promotion of democracy.

In the 1950s, a variant of the defense of Asian democracy in the name of “Thainess” had been propagated (though largely below the global discursive radar) by the authoritarian regime of Sarit Thanarat in Thailand (“Thai-style democracy”). It has more recently re-emerged in some anti-electoral “yellow” discourses since protests against Thaksin Shinawatra began in 2005 (Hewison and Kengkij 2010). This unusual variant of an Asian democracy linked to what Somchai Phatharathanunth (2006) has termed “elitist civil society” to characterize ideas that emerged from an elite reformist movement in Thailand in the 1990s. Prawase Wasi and other

prominent public intellectuals in Thailand began articulating a paternalist ideology in their capacity as “royal liberals” (Connors 2008) within the “network monarchy” (McCargo 2005) of key elites in the Thai establishment led by the King, the Queen, and other members of the monarchy, and the military hierarchy as well as leading businessmen and bureaucrats with close ties to both. In the Thai context, “the elite civil society concept emphasizes cooperation between the state and social organizations” claiming that both “are components of ‘civil society’” (Somchai 2008: 7). Tellingly, such an “elitist” symbiotic view downplayed the importance of “civic mindedness” at the grass-roots level. On the contrary, Prawase “believed that building civil society from below had no future in Thailand” (Somchai 2006: 7). In part this was due to the defeat of the Thai communist party in the late 1970s. But it was also because of an ideology of “partnership” which, in order to avoid confrontation, Prawase proposed between the state, business sector, NGOs, local elite, and intellectuals. In an effort to achieve good governance, civil society should be led by “good” and “capable” elites in order to carry out necessary reforms.

Major financial scandals and revelations by close friends turned enemies were triggers that led to civil society mobilization against the government of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2005. In Thailand, the military overthrow of Thaksin in 2006, backed by “tank” (i.e. pro-military) intellectual supporters, was criticized as being a “coup for the rich” against Thaksin’s pro-poor policies (Ungpakorn 2007). But military rule was weak and incompetent, leaving new elections as the only way out. After a pro-Thaksin successor party won at the polls (following the banning of his earlier populist party), civil society protests against Thaksin and his supporters were revived, culminating in the occupation of Bangkok’s international airport until the pro-Thaksin government was removed from power in an indirect coup in December 2008. But it was not only civil society’s tactics which had radicalized: it abandoned any pretense of defending liberal democracy, calling for a sweeping “new politics” which would involve an undemocratic restructuring of the political order with 70 percent of the seats in parliament to be appointed.

People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) leaders said openly and repeatedly that representative democracy is not suitable for Thailand, calling instead for a form of “democratic” governance appropriate to Thai culture. More recently, in protests that began in late 2013 against an elected government headed by Thaksin’s sister Yingluck Shinawatra, which paved the way for a military coup in May 2014, pro-royalist protester and former Democrat politician Suthep Thaugsuban has called for an unelected “people’s council” to replace the “Thaksin regime” (*The Nation* 2013). His justification is that the “tyranny of the majority” keeps winning elections despite its alleged corruption, and he has renewed the Democrats’ longstanding accusation that Thaksin is anti-monarchy and “un-Thai” (Chairat Charoensin-o-larn 2013; Hodal 2013). Sarinee Achavanuntakul (2013) comments on this phenomenon invoking a vulgar Thai expression often used in this context:

Many PDRC [People’s Democratic Reform Committee] supporters do not deny this plan amounts to a temporary suspension of democracy. That’s alright, they say; Thailand has a unique culture and a unique set of circumstances; we do not need to ‘follow the white man’s ass’ [*tam gon farang*] as a popular idiom goes.

In this regard, Federico Ferrara (in press) has argued that “Thainess” must be recognized as a “modern political ideology, as opposed to the expression of timeless cultural values.” He also points to its “recent origin and self-serving nature.” This pro-royalist discourse portrays Western democracy to be incompatible with the Thai identity which goes far in explaining Thailand’s unstable mixture of attempts at establishing democratic rule and authoritarian overthrow since the 1932 coup ended the country’s absolute monarchy (Ferrara, in press).

The regional dimension: “Asian values” and ASEAN Plus Three

Besides surviving the Asian financial crisis in the form of an authoritarian “good governance” discourse in Singapore, as “neo-Confucianism” in China, and as an ideology in “civil” society protests against the Thaksin regime, an Asian values discourse has also influenced regional developments in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its three negotiating partners in Northeast Asia (China, Japan, and South Korea) through the forming of ASEAN Plus Three (APT). Though proposed in 1997, the APT was only established as a coordinating group for regional cooperation in 1999 after the Asian financial crisis. Duzulkarnain Ahmad (2003) has argued that policy advice provided by international financial organizations such as the World Bank led to a backlash in Southeast Asia among the ASEAN states. Foreign “help” was seen to have only exacerbated the financial meltdown. This “politics of resentment” (Higgot 1998) fueled attempts at greater economic cooperation in the region along lines that were far from Western values of liberal democracy and free markets. Mark Beeson (2002: 561) has argued that APT not only aimed to preserve “East Asian versions of capitalist organization” but may also “even provide a platform for a rearticulation of the so-called ‘Asian values’ discourse which was such a prominent and distinctive part of Southeast Asia’s identity during the boom years.”

Dzulkarnain (2003: 7) argues that “the philosophy of Asian values promoted the creation of the ASEAN+3.” The so-called “ASEAN Way” had been built on strong personal ties between country leaders in the regional association and the principle of noninterference in the internal affairs of other states in a grouping in which many of the regimes were authoritarian. Although generational changes had weakened leadership bonds and ASEAN’s inability to act decisively during the financial crisis was blamed by some on the lack of responsibility within and to the regional group, the tenets of cooperation rather than confrontation and noninterference in the (authoritarian) governance of another state was preserved in the larger APT grouping. Although often described as “reactive regionalism” in which the countries of ASEAN and its new partners were trying to halt the fallout of financial crisis while limiting Western meddling (Ravenhill 2002; Beeson 2003), it was also an assertion that the ASEAN way was still relevant. This non-interference principle had received international attention with the Bangkok Declaration (1993), seen as a landmark in the region’s efforts to supposedly relativize the Asian perspective on human rights in light of the cultural and other particularities of Asia (Follesdal 1995). As recently as 2012, ASEAN’s declaration on human rights adopted similar language in terms of the realization of human rights being limited by cultural factors (Wong 2012; Villanueva 2013). That the discourse of Asian democracy was a crucial part of this justification is most obvious when the contrasting case of the expansion of the European Union (EU) is considered. With the so-called Copenhagen criteria for accession to the community established in 1992, the EU set clear economic and political criteria for potential member states after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. These included not only measures to increase economic competition and establish the rule of law, but also an unambiguous commitment to liberal democracy. By contrast, when establishing the APT, ASEAN did not make any such political demands on its new members in the spirit of respecting the cultural traditions of each member state and rejecting notions of the universalism of Western democracy.

Democrats in Asia

In contrast to Asian authoritarians who denounce “Western democracy” in the name of cultural particularism, democracy advocates in Asia find universal democratic values embedded in religious culture. The most notable example was probably Kim Dae Jung’s answer to Lee Kwan

Yew entitled “The Myth of Asia’s Anti-Democratic Values,” published in the prestigious *Foreign Affairs* (Kim 1994). In addition, the Dalai Lama (1999) and former Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui (Lee 1999) “have declared their rejection of the illiberal and anti-democratic elements of the ‘Asian values’ argument” (Barr 2000: 315). In Southeast Asia, Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid denounced the attempt to use cultural relativism to undermine democracy in the region (Hoon 2004). Aung San Suu Kyi (1995) formulated a rebuttal to the “Asian values”-style critique of democracy in Buddhist culturalist terms, a strategy adopted by oppositionists elsewhere in the region as well.

These advocates of democracy in Asia claim democratic rule cannot be denounced as “Western” because it finds indigenous expression in Asian religious traditions. Drawing on Buddhist, Muslim, or Christian arguments based on the dominant world religion in each Southeast Asian country, it is claimed that popular participation and the justness of opposition to despotic rule are principles deeply rooted in the region’s many religious cultures. In the Islamic context, oppositionist Anwar Ibrahim made a pro-democratic argument in Islamic terms in Malaysia (Anwar Ibrahim 1996), as did Muslim democrats in Indonesia in opposition to Suharto’s dictatorship (Uhlin 1997; Hefner 2000). In the Philippines, the assassination of oppositionist Benigno S. Aquino, Jr. was quickly put in the folk cultural context of Christ’s passion (*pasyon*) (Ileto 1985).

In her writings, Aung San Suu Kyi (1995: 53) has argued that culture does not determine politics:

A nation may choose a system that leaves the protection of the freedom and security of the many dependent on the inclinations of the empowered few; or it may choose institutions and practices that will sufficiently empower individuals and organizations to protect their own freedom and security.

But she has also contextualized this fight for democracy in Burmese Buddhist culture, emphasizing how the meditation practice of *vipassana* (insight contemplation) stresses the universality of human freedom (Houtman 1999). Vishvapani (2012) offers a similar analysis:

Many of Suu Kyi’s speeches have been directed not to the government but to the Burmese people themselves, for she regards democracy as an expression of the people’s ability to take collective responsibility rather than merely a way of distributing power. Suu Kyi saw Burma as a country ‘where intimidation and propaganda work in a duet of oppression, while the people, trapped in fear and distrust, learn to dissemble and keep silent.’ She summed up a sophisticated analysis of this situation in a single sentence: ‘It is not power that corrupts but fear.’ The tyranny was the product of fear and it had sapped their strength. She encouraged them to relearn the habits of taking individual responsibility that were manifest in Burma’s past. For Suu Kyi, the goal of the democracy movement was not to defeat the military but to restore harmony.

Advocates of Asian values and proponents of Asian democracy stand in dialectical relation to one another. Without attempts by oppositionists to increase political space or even bring about democratic transition, the Asian values discourse would probably have never been taken up by authoritarian elites as an attempt to win domestic legitimacy and fend off pressures to introduce democracy. But without the attack on Western democracy, pro-democracy campaigners might not have turned to culturalist arguments in favor of their struggle for greater political liberality. But this observation is not meant to reduce these respective discourses to their instrumentalist

aims. Rather, it is to help to better understand why both authoritarian apologists and democracy advocates found it useful to express their arguments in culturalist terms. Although done within their respective national contexts (with varying degrees of international resonance), collectively and cumulatively these discourses can be seen as part of an Asian struggle over the meanings that can be derived from culture for different political projects. In that sense, a “culturalist commons” emerged in the region in which democrats and authoritarians clashed about what their respective cultures “mean” in political terms.

Conclusion

The loss of international interest in the Asian values discourse resulted from a double misunderstanding. On the one hand, as we have seen, it was thought of primarily as an explanation of the region’s rapid economic growth and thus susceptible to falsification when crisis hit. On the other hand, it was perceived as an international debate and not a discourse directed primarily at domestic audiences. But while international recognition for advocates of a discourse of cultural particularism was lost, the Asian democracy discourse was still used for domestic audiences such as in Singapore and Malaysia in a culturalist variation of the “good governance” discourse. Other nondemocratic regimes also continued to employ variations of a culturalist argument against Western democracy. This was used particularly by the military in Myanmar which, after the crushing of the democracy movement and the end of the socialist experiment in 1988, sought a new way to justify authoritarian rule (Houtman 1999). China began studying the “Singapore model” in earnest in the 1990s, and its interest in tiny Singapore has notably increased during the recent power transition in China in 2012. The Chinese Communist Party (CPP) has also been experimenting with neo-Confucianism as a new state ideology. Although controversial in some central CPP circles, a neo-Confucian discourse was co-opted by some conservative leaders and local party elites as a justification for continued one-party rule by the CPP.

Further, the Asian democracy discourse has persisted in Southeast Asia even in civil society groups, which are normally associated with the promotion of democracy (Thompson 2013). In the cycle of protests that have rocked Thailand since 2005, an anti-Thaksin, pro-monarchy “yellow” discourse has articulated a paternalist ideology which asserts that in order for Thailand to achieve “good governance,” it should be led by “good” and “capable” elites who can carry out necessary reforms. Renewed protests against the “Thaksin regime” (ongoing as of this writing in January 2014) openly denounce Western-style electoral democracy as the “tyranny of the majority” which is “un-Thai” (Chairat Charoensin-o-larn 2013). It has been further argued that the formation of APT enabled the rearticulation of the Asian values discourse which had been so prominent during the economic boom years in the region (Beeson 2003). By contrast, advocates of democracy within Asia often claim democratic rule cannot be denounced as “Western” because of its indigenous expression in Asian religious traditions: the many religious cultures in the region espouse popular participation and opposition to despotic rule.

Notes

- 1 Fareed Zakaria (2002), the bearer of Lee Kuan Yew’s culturalist argument against “Western” democracy, later recanted, saying that while he “found this theory appealing at first, since I am of Indian origin,” he later came to question this argument against democracy: “many Asian dictators used arguments about their region’s unique culture to stop Western politicians from pushing them to democratize.” He found it strange that Lee Kuan Yew, an effective political manager, would attribute the success of Singapore and other successful Asian economies to culture not governance and argued that democracy is a universal value.

- 2 By contrast, Mahathir’s successor as prime minister in Malaysia was more modest about making culturalist claims. As chair of the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) in 2005, he welcomed new “initiatives towards good governance and an intellectually more open and vibrant ummah” (Abdullah 2006: 3). In reaction to the 9/11 events, Abdullah spoke of “Islam Hadhari,” civilizational Islam, or an approach towards a progressive Islamic civilization (Teehankee 2007).
- 3 I am grateful to Stephan Ortmann for this and subsequent Chinese-language references.

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