

## Introduction: States, Critical Citizens, and the Challenge of Democratization in Southeast Asia

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The political trajectories in Southeast Asia are much more complex than neat theoretical models would suggest. In particular, the diverse experience of post-authoritarian states are far from linear – often moving forward, backward, and forward again, or stalling for a number of years. Political trajectories can thus be uneven and erratic, as exemplified by Thailand's military coups, graduating from hegemonic to competitive electoral authoritarian rule in Singapore and Malaysia and lingering within the zone of low-quality democracy as characterized by Indonesia's poor governance and neo-patrimonial dynamics. Indeed, since 2014, Freedom House no longer classifies Indonesia as 'Free', following the passage of legislation restricting the activity of civil society and the human rights violations against religious minorities. Similarly, Thailand lost its 'Free' ranking in 2006 and the Philippines in 2007.

If democratization in Southeast Asia is to be shaped by 'neighbourhood effects', there is little reason to be upbeat about the prospects for democratic shifts and deepening in the broader East Asian region. In his 'geography of democracy' thesis, Reilly (2013) posits that Southeast Asia's proximity to China offers a valuable explanation for the persistence of authoritarian rule – particularly in mainland Southeast Asia. China has purportedly taken particular interest in these 'backyard' East Asian states, via close economic engagement, aid, and at times the threat of military assault. Also noteworthy is the way by which Indonesia's low-quality democracy has allowed the country's elites to reorganize their relations in ways that accommodate oligarchic interests (Aspinall, 2010). However, in Thailand, low-quality democracy has generated to intra-elite confrontations in the form of military coups and regional and class conflict. Large swaths of the Thai middle-class have confounded democratic theory by supporting military coups and colluding with conservative elites, lending credence

to Bellin's (2000) 'contingent democrats' hypothesis – middle-classes reluctance in supporting pro-democracy movements in late-industrializing states.

As the collapse of the Soviet Union in late 1980s, 'Colour Revolutions' in the 1990s and the ongoing 'Arab Uprisings' demonstrate, the breakdown of authoritarian regimes may lead to other forms of authoritarian rule – more often than not, electoral authoritarianism. In these hybrid regimes, the electoral system is systematically rigged by an intricate menu of manipulation, such that opposition parties are massively disadvantaged in achieving the colossal task of unseating the incumbent. Not surprisingly, the international community remains mired in democratic recession, particularly since the turn of the century – with many hybrid or electoral authoritarian regimes remaining relatively resilient. As Schedler (2010: 69) aptly observes, electoral authoritarian regimes are 'the new stars in the constellation of non-democratic governance'.

But amidst the political landscape of democratic recession, lies the Northeast Asian model of regime change – characterized by Slater (2012) as 'strong state democratization'. According to this framework, the collapse of strong authoritarian and electoral authoritarian regimes in Japan (1940s), South Korea (1980s), and Taiwan (1990s) has given rise to consolidated democracies that are underpinned by strong state institutions that pose relatively robust knowledge-based economies. Importantly, these Northeast Asian strong states have outlasted their authoritarian antecedents. Political stability and effective governance, underpinned by strong institutions, have thus been preserved in these post-authoritarian states. As Slater (2012: 26) notes, 'The iron cages of authoritarian Leviathans have been redeployed for democratic purposes in Korea and Taiwan, but they have by no means been dismantled.' The South Korean and Taiwanese strong-state democratization experience thus illustrates how ruling parties from the authoritarian era can thrive in complex post-authoritarian environments. Out of power, former dominant parties, such as Taiwan's Kuomintang (KMT) of Taiwan, have recalibrated and adapted to the changed political environment, eventually regaining the levers of government. As such, Friedman and Wong (2008: 5) posit that 'Learning to lose is not only about accepting defeat but also about devising strategies for winning. Losing need not be permanent.' This then raises the question: what is the likelihood of the strong but electoral authoritarian state of Singapore and of Malaysia, Southeast Asia's most developed economies that possess a sizeable educated middle-class, gravitating towards the Northeast Asian model of strong state democratization? It is worth noting at this juncture that the Malaysia's *Barisan Nasional* (National Front) and Singapore's People's Action Party governments are no longer hegemonic authoritarian regimes following their lack lustre electoral performance in the most recent general elections. They are no longer considered invincible in political terms, following repeated electoral backlashes, widening intra-elite divisions, and major policy missteps – and are more commonly referred to as competitive (electoral) authoritarian regimes.

In this Special Issue, Rahim analyses the prospects of strong state democratization in the authoritarian developmental state of Singapore, characterized by the growing influence of 'critical citizens' – public intellectuals, grassroots activists, bloggers, and

others operating in autonomous non-government organizations that are inclined to engage with opposition parties in pressuring for greater democratic space and transparent governance. Inter alia, these well-educated and globally oriented critical citizens have become increasingly alienated with the paternalism of authoritarian rule. Collectively, Singaporean critical citizens have been chipping away at the entrenched public fear, fuelled by government propaganda, that regime change will destabilize the state and generate political instability. Rahim contends that the political efficacy of critical citizens has been propelled by policies such as the highly unpopular high growth population policy and the selective implementation of neo-liberal policies which have eroded the 'growth with equity' social compact of the post-independence developmental state. The policy critiques by Singaporean public intellectuals and establishment personalities, particularly in the last decade or so, are indicative of their willingness to boldly test the political boundaries. Complementing Rahim's article, Lim discusses the way by which the ideational footing of the ruling PAP government's top-down 'manufactured nationalism' has been destabilized by the appeal of a bottom-up 'popular nationalism' galvanized by unpopular government policies.

The articles by Liddle and Mujani and Pietsch and Clark highlight the vital role of critical citizens in buttressing Indonesia's democracy. Liddle and Mujani's quantitative analysis of post-election surveys since 1998 found that critical citizens in Indonesia value democracy but are critical of its performance. They find that citizens with a higher socio-economic background tend to be more critical of democratic performance. The higher the level of education, the more negative is his or her evaluation of democratic performance. Such critical evaluations made by Indonesian citizens and their neighbours in Malaysia lead Pietsch and Clark to argue that early enthusiasm for the spread of democracy in the region was perhaps premature given the reservations that citizens have about democracy and governance. Significantly, the analyses of critical citizens in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia by the various authors in this Special Issue generally resonate with Norris's (2011: 14–16) perspective of disenfranchised citizens in Western liberal democracies – those who possess post-material and self-expression values and tend to be 'more informed, less deferential and more demanding' in their expectations of governance.

The perceived partiality and deficient performance of Malaysia's authoritarian state institutions appear to be a major force fuelling the pro-democracy (*reformasi*) movement's attempts to challenge the country's consociational and communal political system. The strength of this movement is demonstrated in the 2008 and 2013 election results, commonly referred to as 'breakthrough elections' for being the most fiercely fought in the country's history. In the 2013 election, the incumbent *Barisan Nasional* (National Front) coalition government lost the popular vote to the opposition *Pakatan Rakyat* (People's Alliance) – exposing the unpopularity of communal governance, particularly amongst ethnic minorities and a sizeable portion of the urban and educated middle-classes. Segawa and Pietsch and Clark note the lack of trust and confidence in state institutions in Malaysia.

At the global level, the record of consociational political arrangements is chequered, exhibiting some success in liberal democracies. However, in many non-democratic states with institutionalized consociational political arrangements, sectarian divisions have become entrenched. This is evidenced in Lebanon, Iraq, and Malaysia. In these states, consociationalism becomes particularly problematic when incumbent regimes resort to sectarian political platforms and repression in response to serious challenges. In contemporary Malaysia, sectarian divisions, via ethnic and religious outbidding, have been fuelled by chauvinistic racial/religious elements, even at the risk of corroding constitutionalism, citizenship rights, and sustainable nation building. In this Special Issue, Segawa emphasizes the ‘slippery slope’ of consociational and communal politics in Malaysia and postulates that there has been a fracturing but not a retreat of communalism – ironically even within the opposition *Pakatan Rakyat* (*People’s Alliance*) coalition, made up of political parties that exhibit deep-seated sectarian tendencies.

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