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Political culture in Southeast Asia
The myth or reality of authoritarianism?

Bridget Welsh and Kai-Ping Huang

“With few exceptions, democracy has not brought good government to new developing countries... What Asians value may not necessarily be what Americans or Europeans value. Westerners value the freedoms and liberties of the individual. As an Asian of Chinese cultural background, my values are for a government which is honest, effective and efficient.

Lee Kuan Yew, Tokyo, 1992

Singapore’s strongman and former premier set the tone of what would become the ‘Asian values’ debate in the 1990s with these remarks. He argued that Asians had different values than those of the West, a claim that continues to be debated over two decades later. In fact, the debate over the role of values in political life has roots much earlier. With works by leading political scientists, such as Lucien Pye and Benedict Anderson, Southeast Asia has been at the heart of the discussions of how political culture shapes political behavior and regime support. Scholars and practitioners alike have repeatedly emphasized that citizens accept more authoritarian rule as a result of the norms and values of their communities. Sometimes, political culture is tied directly to religion, be it Islam or Confucian beliefs, while other times, this belief in a concentration of power is conceived of as mystical and connected to socialized rituals.

In looking at how political culture has shaped our understanding of politics in Southeast Asia, this chapter is anchored around the arguments surrounding citizen support for authoritarian government. The discussion not only lays out the evolution of the debates surrounding political culture in the region but also draws from existing surveys in Southeast Asia to show how relevant and accurate the theoretical arguments are today. We include available empirical time series evidence. The survey findings are drawn from the Asian Barometer Surveys (ABS) conducted in eight Southeast Asian countries (Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) from 2001 to 2016. The findings show that while political culture arguments continue to have resonance in Southeast Asian scholarship and public life, they fail to fully capture the diverse and changing attitudes and values of Southeast Asians in the contemporary era or the trajectory of how political culture is changing.
Political culture in Southeast Asia: early studies

Political culture is a set of values that define norms or proper political behavior in a given society. Such norms involve day-to-day interactions with others as well as the relationship between rulers and the ruled. Norms are reinforced through socialization, and people rely on these norms to judge whether others’ behavior is acceptable. Political culture, therefore, provides important insights into how and why citizens practice and engage politics as they do.

Political culture has long been an important concept, explaining different social phenomena in a comparative perspective. In his classic work discussing the Protestant ethic and religions of China and India, Max Weber forged the typical images of the West and East, with the former emphasizing individualism and rationalism and the latter prioritizing communitarianism and patrimonialism (Weber 2002). The rise of capitalism and modernity in the Western world, Weber argued, was due to the cultural influences embedded in religion, which was against the cultural heritages of the East that kept the old civilizations backward. Weber’s intellectual concern focused on the arrival of a new economic order. His work inspired scholars who used culture to probe the origins of political systems, to explain social and economic development, and to understand political behavior in later days.

The rise of behaviorism in the 1960s broke further ground in political cultural studies, providing evidence that culture, individual orientation, and behavior were indeed tied together. Applying in-depth face-to-face interviews, individuals’ values and behavior were used to understand why democracy persisted in some countries but not in others (Almond and Verba 1989). Analyzing interview records, Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba concluded that national pride, active political participation, cooperation and trust, and membership in political associations were decisive factors, which they called civic culture. This work also marked the arrival of political culture as a substantive concept in political science, a tradition that continues with the work of Seymour Martin Lipset and Jason M. Lakin (2004) and Ronald Inglehart (1997).

Southeast Asia became a prominent area for the study of political culture. Seen as a region influenced by a diverse range of ‘Eastern’ cultures—Hinduism, Confucianism, and Islam, to name the three most prominent—and possessing practices and local beliefs that made these religions and belief systems their own, Southeast Asia attracted scholars to engage in fieldwork and apply the research zeal of the developing concept. Much of this early work on political culture in Southeast Asia formulated concepts that have reinforced the view that the underlying attitudes in the region support and engage in supportive political behavior toward a more concentrated political system.

There were two thrusts in the early work. The first focused on conceptualizing how Southeast Asians perceived power. This was tied to views of moral authority and socialized norms in daily life. The classic text in this regard is Anderson’s “Javanese concept of power” (Anderson and Holt 1972). He argued that Javanese rulers were mediators between God and the commoners, and that they contained mystical authority. This tied into the idea of raja adil or the ‘just king,’ drawn from Hinduism (von-Heine Geldern 1956; Wolters 1982). As such, rulers possessed and held on to their power rather than competing and sharing control. Power was thus concentrated, and the actions of the ruler were not judged for his actions as the leader were the moral authority. This view of power was reinforced by societal norms. It was argued that harmony was highly praised as a human quality in Javanese culture in which conflicts were to be avoided to maintain social peace, even though there were disagreements...
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(Sarsito 2006). Similarly, consensus was prioritized over conflict. These ideas underscored the authoritarian rule of ‘Guided Democracy’ formulated by the former Indonesian president Sukarno, which emphasized the importance of a paternalistic state for the stability of the society and elite consensus rather than market competition and electoral contestation (Eklof 2004). Under the New Order era, his Pancasila (five principles) was an extension on the values and philosophy of Javanese culture that upheld monotheism, social welfare, representative democracy, justice, and nationalism—elements that are now traditionally seen as essential elements of Indonesia’s political culture.

Concentrated notions of power were also echoed in Lucien and Mary Pye’s Asian Power and Politics (1985). The authors compared concepts of power in Burma, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines, and concluded that context and socialized norms from local beliefs and religious traditions were similarly important determinants of how power was seen and practiced. Burmese, for example, were taught to be aware of five enemies—fire, flood, famine, plague, and government—reinforcing distrust in authority. However, Buddhism in Burma, the Pyes argued, reinforced a fatalist acceptance of authority, especially the acceptance of elite and military rule as well as the use of coercion. This view has underscored views of political culture in Burma (Smith 1965; Spiro 1982; Gyi 1983). As with the ‘Javanese concept of power,’ those in power contained moral authority as a product of holding the position. Force was the prerogative of those in power, not challengers. These views were seen to permeate deeply. In Burmese, power can be translated into two words, with ana referring to power with force and awza referring to power without any form of coercion (Kawanami 2009). To wield awza, the individuals must have moral quality in the eyes of those who are willing to spontaneously offer their services with the belief that those in power will take care of their needs. Respect for authority was therefore accepted based on a perceived broad consensus in society. Thais, like their Burmese neighbors, were similarly seen to respect authority and believe that kings (leaders) should carry moral qualities and be benevolent, like fathers looking after their children (Chaloemtiarana 2007).

The Pyes, along with other scholars, suggested that views of authority varied across the region. There was greater emphasis on the actions of rulers as opposed to their inherent possessed authority in places such as the Philippines, Singapore, and Malaysia. The delivery of benefits, often in the form of patronage through a paternalistic state, was deemed essential, which has reinforced a combination of support for a strong interventionist state and attention to government performance, especially in the economy (Subramaniam 2001). This was a view seen to be held by both elites and the public at large. Singapore’s ruling party, the People’s Action Party, tends to view its citizens as children whose needs should be satisfied to avoid upheavals, a norm that was prominently socialized in the Lee Kuan Yew era, 1959–1990 (Barr 2000). There was a focus on delivery in the economy. In exchange, freedom and multiparty politics were to be curbed to preserve economic achievement. Lee had famously stated that “If Singapore is a nanny state, then I am proud to have fostered one” (Lee 2012). Elite rule and paternalism were cornerstones of Singapore’s development model and socialized political culture—norms that were seen throughout the region from the Philippines to Indonesia.

Closely connected to the idea of concentrated power with accompanying values of consensus/acceptance, harmony, and paternalism, the second thrust of early research on values in Southeast Asia focused on the relationship between citizens and power. It was the region where scholars such as Carl Landé (1965) and James Scott (1969) identified the importance of political patronage. Personal ties, loyalty, and reciprocity were seen as underlying
patron-client ties. These relationships were not just about mutually beneficial political interests, in which unequal partners shared goods and favors for political loyalty, but were connected to personal interactions in a region where people were seen to be valued and wooed. Less populated compared to Africa and other parts of Asia, contests for political power in Southeast Asia involved winning public support, as the measure of a patron was not the amount of territory in his possession but the number of people he supported who, in turn, supported him (Scott 1998).

Scholars found different patterns and drivers of patronage across Southeast Asia. The Pyes (1985) argued that Filipinos were highly competitive in seeking out patrons in their extended families to get advantages. As such, the relationships between Filipino clients and patrons were transient and marred by distrust. The Filipino party system is full of dyadic ties that originated from early socialization experiences of establishing person-to-person, superordinate-subordinate relationships to improve personal circumstances (Landé 1965). The relationships between patrons and clients are sustained by mutual benefits—the former needs votes, and the latter needs tangible favors (cash, jobs, public works, etc.); such relationships, however, might not be stable as both parties search for different agents to get better deals. Low levels of interpersonal trust and the dependence on client-patron dyadic ties emerge as model social characteristics in the Philippines.

By contrast, Thais, Indonesians, and Malaysians were seen to be more trusting and loyal to their patrons (Milner 1982; Sukatipan 1995; Amoroso 2014). This was tied to their inherent respect for their leaders, who were expected to be kind and moral, to take care of their peoples’ welfare, and often to be from the political elite or royalty. The political culture in these Southeast Asian countries was seen to be tied to reciprocity, in which the welfare of citizens was deemed an essential responsibility of the ruler. The idea of reciprocity fed into support for elite rule and a more paternalistic state but also contributed to a perceived acceptance of inequality as well as a priority of the welfare of the community as opposed to the individual. Scholars such as Clifford Geertz (1963) and Scott (1977, 1985) highlighted the importance of strong social ties as binding in Indonesian and Malaysian societies, relations that assured that a ‘moral economy’ protected the welfare of members of the community through patronage and shared distributions of goods. There was a baseline threshold of equality in the basic needs for all that was to be met. The idea of the ‘moral economy’ in Southeast Asia was challenged by Samuel Popkin (1979) and Michael Peletz (1983), who argued that competition and individualism were stronger than consensus and community, a debate that continued with research on village life from Vietnam and Malaysia to Indonesia (Elson 1997).

These early studies reinforced the idea that Southeast Asia supported authoritarian elite rule tied to a distributive system of patronage backed by a strong interventionist state. Paternalism, harmony, consensus, communitarianism, and inequality were accepted norms, buttressing this hierarchical political culture. Despite different religious heritages, perceived levels of social trust, and political developments, these norms are seen as common themes across the region. It is therefore not surprising to see leaders argue that authoritarianism was backed by the political culture of their citizens.

‘Asian values’ and advocates for authoritarianism in Southeast Asia

This is exactly what happened in the 1990s ‘Asian values’ debate. With the rapid economic development in the 1980s, leaders in Southeast Asia had gained confidence in their own models of development. The characteristics highlighted by European Orientalists as the
reasons for backwardness in developing countries—communitarianism, paternalism, and respect for authority—were now praised as the driving force for development in Southeast Asia. Backed up by their economic success, Singapore’s Lee and Malaysia’s Mahathir Mohamad became strong advocates of ‘Asian values’ as political culture continued to shape debate over authoritarianism in Southeast Asia.

‘Asian values’ is a series of claims that prioritize community interests over the vested interest of individuals (Bell 2009). Community interests range from one’s own family to the society and state, as conceptualized by those in power. Social harmony and avoiding open conflicts are prioritized over conflict and challenges to authority. Decision-making was believed to be based on elite consensus instead of confrontation and engagement. The region’s paternalistic state was not only to bring about economic growth and development, it was to maintain social cohesion and promote moral principles based on community-oriented, elite-defined norms. Emphasis was placed on duties instead of rights, on collectivity instead of individuality, and on economic well-being instead of political equality. Citizens were loyal subjects, who should follow their leaders. Advocates of ‘Asian values’ tied these values to the beliefs of Confucianism and Islam, and used these arguments to challenge calls to open up their regimes and criticize democracy. Democracy and economic development were usually portrayed as a trade-off, and political rights and civil liberties were deemed unnecessary to the improvement of lives of ordinary people and at times might even be detrimental to social order and harmony (Sen 1997).

‘Asian values’ drew from many of the norms of earlier studies of political culture, particularly support for concentrated political power. What differentiated ‘Asian values’ from previous studies was that it diminished differences within Asia, with a broad cultural relativist call of the world’s most populated region as having the same norms. This focus on Asia as a whole connected to the dominant paradigm of the time (before the Asian financial crisis of 1997) of a rising region and dismissed variation within and across countries (Kausikan 1993). It also sharply contrasted ‘Asia’ with the ‘West’ in a confrontational dichotomization of political culture framework. Critics of ‘Asian values,’ such as Donald Emmerson (1995) and Richard Robison (1996), pointed to the opportunistic manner in which leaders used the framework to support their governance. Others identified the inconsistencies between the reality of diversity of values and experience in the region with the overly simplistic framework (Engle 1999; Zakaria 2002). Yet others openly challenged their assertions as failing to connect to the aspirations of their citizens (Sen 1997). The 1997 Asian financial crisis that severely affected the region’s economic growth, calling into question the factors accounting for the region’s development success and serving as a catalyst for widening democracy in Indonesia and to a lesser extent Thailand, debunked much of the credibility of the ‘Asian values’ arguments.

Contemporary political culture from citizens’ perspectives

As with the early political culture studies of Southeast Asia, however, the ‘Asian values’ arguments lived on. Writing a decade later, Mark Thompson (2001, 2004) highlighted how the regimes of the advocates of Asian values—Singapore and Malaysia—had survived the crisis, and the arguments surrounding governance, authoritarianism, and democracy were as alive as ever. While the tenures of strongmen Mahathir and Lee have passed, there is little unanimity on how political culture shapes views of authoritarianism and democracy in Southeast Asia. With a democratic contraction in the region, notably in the third-wave democracies of Thailand (which experienced a coup in 2014) and the Philippines (which
elected a strongman leader, Rodrigo Duterte, in May 2016) and the continued dominance of one-party rule in Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia and one-man rule in Brunei, political culture arguments continue to have resonance. Myanmar (formerly Burma) is seen by some as the exception to the persistence of authoritarianism, but the arguments about traditional authoritarian values are as salient there as they are in the rest of the region (Welsh, Huang and Chu 2016).

What differs now, however, is that the study of political culture and values in Southeast Asia has greater access to comparative survey data than in the past. Unlike the rich descriptive ethnographic studies of the past, which allowed for in-depth analysis, national representative surveys allow for greater attention to variation and comparison across and within countries, as well as help us understand the underlying arguments of why citizens across Southeast Asia have these different values. The ABS findings show the region’s greater diversity in its political values and reveal that modern, more democratic attitudes are more prominent than the earlier debates would suggest.¹ The assumption that Southeast Asians accept a concentration of power and the accompanying supporting norms is being challenged. At the same time, majorities across Southeast Asia continue to adopt more authoritarian values, although inconsistently.

To begin, we look at whether Southeast Asians support authoritarian rule or its alternatives. A majority of citizens in the region preferred democracy on average at 64%, with the least being in the Philippines at 47% and the strongest preference being in Cambodia at 74%. ABS research on views of democracy reveals that definitions of what democracy means, however, vary, with many actually supporting a ‘democracy’ ideal that is not, in fact, what is seen to be democracy elsewhere (Chu and Huang 2010). ‘Democracy’ has become a term applied to nondemocratic regimes and socialized in nondemocratic ways. Thus, in looking at whether Southeast Asians actually have authoritarian values, we assess key components of democracy, namely checks and balances (such as an independent judiciary), accountability, and protection of the rule of law. The findings shown in Figure 15.1 indicated a conflicted region. There is limited support for an independent judiciary, especially in Vietnam and the Philippines, with majorities across the region opposing the judiciary as a check on other political institutions. Yet Southeast Asians are more divided on the need for accountability and generally oppose interventions that undermine the rule of law. On average, 61% of respondents across the countries disapprove judicial independence, 53% disapprove horizontal accountability, and 45% rule of law. For individual countries, there is a rather mixed picture. More than two-thirds of Vietnamese disapproved the independent status of the judicial system, but almost half of citizens demanded horizontal accountability and rule of law. A majority of Burmese did not approve horizontal accountability, but they highly supported rule of law. Across waves, the largest change happened in Thailand, where there was a 29% increase of disapproving an independent judiciary. The judicial system has become a tool of the military and conservative forces to intervene in politics (Dressel 2010). Though highly controversial, it was thought a solution to resolve conflicts albeit temporally. This might explain the surge of Thai support for this norm. Together with Vietnamese, Thais have become more authoritarian oriented over time, indicating the influence of political institutions on norms and values.

The broad but inconsistent authoritarian orientation is buttressed by other values. Preserving harmony and avoiding open conflicts is a norm highly adopted in Southeast Asian societies. People are more likely to recoil from conflicts in their communities and the society at large to maintain harmony. At least 80% of respondents in every country surveyed agree that one should avoid open quarrel and conflicts with others to preserve harmony.
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harmony. People, however, are ready to confront their coworkers and insist on their own opinions when disagreements arise. Burmese are the most conflict-averse here compared to people in other countries, contrasting the image of Burma which has been plagued by ethnic and religious conflicts (Welsh and Huang 2016a). Next follows Indonesia, where conflict avoidance is a quality praised in Javanese culture and seen as sustaining elite rule (Figure 15.2).

Southeast Asians similarly emphasize communitarianism or allocentric (community-minded) values (Shi 2014). In an allocentric perspective, individuals are encouraged to make sacrifices for the interests and survivals of family, society, and the nation. The ABS asked individuals whether they should sacrifice for the interests of family, society, and the nation. Taking the average of the percentages of agreeing with the norms across waves of surveys available, we can see that such norms are highly supported across the countries. More than 80% of respondents in every country agree that the individual should put his personal interests second for the sake of the family. Though sacrificing for group’s collective and national interests is less supported, still more than two-thirds accepted the norms. Based on the data from different waves (2010–2015), over time more Filipinos, Malaysians,
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and Singaporeans adopted allocentric outlooks, while such norms lost its support in Cambodia. Overall, the orientation of communitarianism remains strong across the region (Figure 15.3).

In contrast to communitarianism and preserving harmony, Southeast Asians are gradually moving away from paternalism. Although regional leaders usually portray themselves as a father figure, especially in the strongmen authoritarian regimes, fewer people treat their government leaders as the head of the family and profess to follow their decisions unconditionally. The proportion of agreeing with this view hovers around 60%, with the highest levels in Indonesia (75%), where the Sukarno and Suharto strongmen legacies remain prevalent. Most Southeast Asians also disagree that governments should decide whether certain ideas should be allowed to be discussed in society, to serve as the guardian of the people. Yet using censorship to control ideas is well received in Malaysia, Vietnam, and Cambodia due to the long practice of censorship by governments there. Even with a morally upright leader, the power of decision-making is not without constraints. Support for a moral leader is highest in Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Vietnam. Across time, Cambodians have become the least supportive of father figures, while the Thais and Singaporeans were the most against censorship. While more Vietnamese longed for a moral leader, Thais have been going in the opposite direction (Figure 15.4).

In conjunction with the decline of a controlling paternalist state, the norm of respect for hierarchical order and authority gets less support as well. Although teachers more or less maintain their authority, parents seem to face more challenges. Less than a third of respondents disagree that politics should be monopolized by educated people. Between waves, more Cambodians rejected the norm of being obedient children and students (9% and 6% decrease) as well as Thais (21% decrease). Yet oddly, more Thais (8% increase) did not support the idea that people with little or no education should have as much say in politics as highly educated people. This change can be tied to the political turmoil in the country, which is commonly perceived as a class struggle against elite rule (Chachavalpongpun 2012). There was a surge for respect for authority in the Philippines in the latest (2013) ABS survey, with 13% increase in reverence for parents and 10% increase for teachers (Figure 15.5).

Despite the changes in views of authority and the levels of control of the state, Southeast Asians continue to support an interventionist state, expecting the government to solve

![Figure 15.3 Allocentric orientation of self-interest.](image-url)
problems, such as income inequality, in the country. Over 90% of Indonesians, Singaporeans, and Myanmar citizens hold this view. It is only in the Philippines where there is less support for this, at 61%, but here too, a high majority support this outlook.

This points to the resilience of the idea of the ‘moral economy’ where a level of equality is valued (Figure 15.6).

Tracing the changes in political culture across time and space, the findings indicate that authoritarian orientations and supporting values are still important cultural traits in Southeast Asia. While there are differences among countries and issues, even within countries, and there are large shares of Southeast Asians who adopt alternative perspectives on many dimensions, the picture that emerges is one in which, decades later, Southeast Asia remains a region with a predominant authoritarian political culture, which is in conjunction with the arrangement of political systems. Political institutions and regime governance play an important role upholding such norms. Figure 15.7 shows that the level of democracy is negatively correlated with authoritarian values, and with a higher level of democracy, people are less likely to agree with authoritarian values. Regimes that have long tenures of authoritarian rule socialize and embed authoritarian values.

Yet the empirical findings also point to a bifurcated pattern. On the one hand, people still hold onto norms of communitarianism and harmony despite rapid economic development
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and modernization. On the other hand, people want their leaders to be held accountable and follow the rule of law, and expect them to solve their peoples’ problems. There is clearly a decline in the willingness to turn over authority unconditionally, to a father figure, guardian, or moral leader, as the expectations of governments remain high.

Vietnam is a case in point. Compared to other countries in the region, the one-party state has made citizens into subjects, highly dependent on the party and the state. At the same time, it has wielded tight control through control of education and the media as well as arrests of dissidents. While countries such as Cambodia, Malaysia, and Singapore are facing challenges to the old political order, Vietnamese seem to accept the norms of paternalism and respect for authority. The same can be said of Myanmar, as the legacy of over fifty years of military rule has socialized authoritarian values. It is not just the authoritarian regimes that are shaping political culture. In the region’s democracies of Thailand, the Philippines, and to a lesser extent Indonesia, there is considerable dissatisfaction with democracy in areas of governance, especially corruption, and considerable authoritarian nostalgia, although the level of authoritarian values is lower than in the nondemocratic regimes. The data show that

Figure 15.6 Support for government intervention on equality.

Figure 15.7 Correlation between authoritarian values and level of democracy.
little has been done to socialize and encourage the acceptance of alternative, more democratic norms in parts of Southeast Asian societies, although support for the ideal of democracy remains high.

Trajectories ahead: concluding reflections

This chapter examined the evolution of political culture in Southeast Asia, closing with time series and contemporary data on the values and attitudes of citizens in eight countries in the region. Despite decades of economic development, with rising levels of education and incomes, a majority of citizens across the region hold onto authoritarian values. They do not fully embrace checks and balances and the practice of accountability. They prioritize harmony and communitarianism, and still hold onto the view of a paternalistic state, although one without the same level of unchecked obedience than in the past. It would seem that the persistence of authoritarianism in Southeast Asia continues to have cultural roots, as political culture remains an important explanatory dimension of the region’s politics.

At the same time, the findings point to the importance of political institutions and experience in shaping contemporary political culture in Southeast Asia. Modernization has had an impact, as well, as it helps us understand the variation among Southeast Asians within countries. Broadly, those that are more educated and with higher incomes have adopted more democratic values (Welsh and Huang 2016b). Yet, as with the variation in authoritarian values, there is inconsistency. Modernization is not the main driver of changes and consistencies in political culture. The findings point to the importance of political institutions and experience in shaping contemporary political culture in Southeast Asia. How citizens are socialized and engaged and the effectiveness of political institutions in delivery, especially the weaknesses in governance in areas of corruption, emerge as important underlying explanations of both persistence of views and changes in views, from Singapore to Thailand. In fact, the findings highlight a reversal in the causal argument over ‘Asian values’: It is authoritarian regime that instills and upholds certain orientations and norms, not inherited cultural orientations that bred authoritarianism.

Note


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