Routledge Handbook of Politics in Asia

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Publication details

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Published online on: 26 Mar 2018

How to cite :- Ehito Kimura. 26 Mar 2018, Democratization and the lack thereof in Southeast Asia from: Routledge Handbook of Politics in Asia Routledge
Accessed on: 06 Oct 2019

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Democratization and the lack thereof in Southeast Asia

Ehito Kimura

Despite the “Third Wave” of democracy in the late 20th century, Southeast Asia has been “recalcitrant” to global democratic trends (Emmerson 1995). Only two countries in the region today, Indonesia and the Philippines, are generally considered to be electorally democratic, and even they are labeled only as “partly free” by Freedom House’s democracy index (“Freedom House” 2015). Other countries in the region include states with varying forms of authoritarianism, including those led by single parties, military rule, and even sultanates. This is not to suggest that Southeast Asia is politically inert. Nearly every country in the region has faced existential turmoil, and several have alternated between democracy and authoritarianism over the past several decades. Today, the wealthiest two countries in the region (Singapore and Brunei) are not considered democratic, challenging the established link between economic development and democratization. Of the region’s two middle-income countries, the Philippines is a perennial “low-quality” democracy, and Thailand has faced civil strife and is currently under military rule. Arguably, the most democratic country in the region, Indonesia, has a population that is ninety percent Muslim, confounding popular discourse about the incompatibility of Islam and democratization (Huntington 1996). And the region’s most entrenched authoritarian regime, Myanmar, has suddenly and unexpectedly begun to make significant moves toward political liberalization and electoral democracy (Turnell 2012).

Southeast Asia’s experiences thus historically and comparatively force us to confront the region’s variety and variability. This, in turn, upends some of the common theories in comparative politics about political change and democratization. The region’s overall pattern of democratic recalcitrance also forces us to pay closer attention to political continuity in addition to political change (Slater 2006) and the increasingly blurred lines between democratic and authoritarian rule (Diamond 2002). This chapter offers an overview of the historical experiences and how economic, cultural, and institutional perspectives have helped to explain political change, democratization, and authoritarian durability in the region.

Political change in Southeast Asia

Despite Southeast Asia’s immense diversity, the region also shares elements of a common political history. Changing patterns of state formation, colonization, nationalism, and
Democratization and the lack thereof

revolution have all helped to forge the states that make up contemporary Southeast Asia. After independence, states grappled with key issues, including how to organize their central political institutions. Constitutional democracy was a popular option but only one of several, and states in the region would experience political systems ranging from liberal democracies to closed and opaque authoritarian regimes.

Like some other world regions, political organization in Southeast Asia has its roots in classical agrarian kingdoms, including the temple-building kingdoms of Angkor, Pagan, and Java (Tarling 1999). However, expanding trade, changes in technology, and demographic shifts around the 14th and 15th centuries led to the gradual decline of these larger classical states in favor of the smaller port city-states dotting much of maritime Southeast Asia, such as Melaka, Makassar, and Pattani (Reid 1988). Political authority in this early period was overwhelmingly grounded in absolutism; leaders of these polities usually claimed supernatural authority through older models of sublime kingship or manifested through the newer religious cosmologies of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam (Reid 1988). However, given that absolutism in the region emerged without an underlying ideology and because it had substantial limitations in actual practice, it would come under pressure, especially with the arrival of colonialism.

The arrival of European colonialism transformed the regional economy and both fragmented and consolidated political power in the region. While some local states were initially able to ally with, stave off, or negotiate some measure of autonomy vis-à-vis colonial rule, by the 18th and 19th centuries, virtually the entire region had fallen under European colonial power, with the notable exception of Siam, contemporary Thailand. More to the point, colonial consolidation shaped what would become the region's states. By the early 20th century, the Dutch had secured the East Indies; the British were in Burma and Malaya, including Singapore; the French held Indochina; the Portuguese occupied East Timor; and the Spanish and later the Americans colonized the Philippines.

Colonial policy also transformed the political elites and institutions throughout the region. In the East Indies, for example, the Dutch colonial state ruled indirectly through the priyai, transforming them into a bureaucratic elite (Sutherland 1979). In the Philippines, wealthy landowning mestizos also became political elites due to the combined legacies of Spanish and American rule (Hutchcroft 2000). Colonial rule also shifted the demographic character in much of the region, producing a Chinese capitalist class and also importing labor from South Asia and producing “plural societies” (Furnivall 1956). America’s bicameral legislatures, British parliamentarianism, the Dutch volksraad, and other Western institutions were all introduced in their respective colonial systems and became sites and symbols of contestation. They formed avenues for politicization, including those for anti-colonial movements, and also often helped to shape political institutions that would emerge after independence.

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, nationalism and anti-colonialism spread throughout much of the region, threatening colonial rule. Nationalism manifested itself in different kinds of organizations and mobilizations. Some groups sought to emulate Western nationalism, while others incorporated indigenous and religious ideas into their nationalist organizations. Sarekat Islam in Indonesia, for example, promoted nationalism and Islamic modernism, and produced many of Indonesia’s top nationalist leaders, including its first president, Sukarno (Ricklefs 1993). Other groups, such as Burma’s Young Men’s Buddhist Association, the YMBA, debated how politicized they should become and eventually split off into a secular organization, the General Council of Burmese Association (GCBA). And while some groups operated openly, nationalist mobilization in many cases went underground and
became revolutionary. Communism would also become a potent political ideology, mobilizing anti-colonial and nationalist movements in much of the region, including in Burma, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and French Indochina.

Even as these movements gained ground, World War II and the Japanese invasion and colonization of the region proved a decisive and transformative period. Japan proclaimed an “Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere,” but their brutality, including forced labor, forced prostitution, and summary executions, dispelled any notions of common brotherhood and alienated those who initially embraced them as liberators. At the same time, when it became increasingly clear that they would lose the war, the Japanese began to support nationalist movements in Burma, Indonesia, and some other parts of the region. More broadly, the Japanese occupation arguably shattered any myth of European invulnerability in the region.

When the European colonizers sought to return, they would find fierce resistance and fervent movements for national independence. In the Philippines, the Americans followed through on their promise to leave in 1946. Burma too would achieve independence from the British relatively quickly and without heavy violence by 1948. In contrast, the Dutch sought to take back the East Indies, fighting for five years before capitulating to Indonesia’s nationalist resistance and the international community in 1950. The British also retook Malaysia and Singapore but eventually allowed self-governance and independence by 1957. The French became mired in their attempts to return to Indochina for nearly a decade before withdrawing in 1954 and relinquishing the fight to the Americans.

As the colonies in Southeast Asia became independent states one by one, several forged constitutions that reflected democratic values. They called for the establishment of legislatures and elections, and developed political parties. Some also institutionalized the freedom of religion and other fundamental rights. In Indonesia, Sukarno led a country that would have a vibrant and competitive presidential system with parliamentary characteristics, including fiercely contested elections in 1955. Newly independent Burma adopted a constitution in 1947 and held elections for a legislative assembly in 1951 and 1956, though it was mired in civil strife for much of this time. Malaysia and Singapore too would introduce parliamentary democracy and hold a series of competitive and free elections. Singapore would vote to join the Malay Union but ultimately be ousted and forced to hold its own national elections in 1963.

For those countries that experimented with democracy after independence, a variety of factors led to democratic unraveling and the adoption of military or one-party systems. In Burma, General Ne Win cited instability and turmoil, and led a military takeover of the government in 1962. In Indonesia, President Sukarno, frustrated by political deadlock and internal conflict, declared “Guided Democracy,” suspending the constitution, in 1957. He would be succeeded in 1965 by Suharto, who would draw the reins even tighter under the authoritarian “New Order” regime. In the Philippines, President Marcos declared martial law in 1972, citing civil strife and the threat of communism. And Malaysia and Singapore’s dominant one-party systems also emerged, citing communal tensions after a series of ethnic riots in the 1960s. Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia eventually emerged from conflict and ultimately led to single-party-based communist regimes. And Thailand’s experience proved confounding as it technically remained a constitutional monarchy but was ruled mostly through the military during the early postwar years.

The region’s authoritarian leaders often justified their rule through the experience of the Cold War. Suharto founded his regime based on conflict with the communists, and similar concerns would be echoed by virtually all the leaders in the region. Marcos cited the communist threat, including the New People’s Army and several bombings in Manila, for
Democratization and the lack thereof

his decision to impose martial law. State parties in Singapore and Malaysia also consistently warned about the threat of leftist parties. Not surprisingly, the communist states in Indochina would cite imperialism and capitalism as threats.

But as the logic of the Cold War waned, and the region grew more prosperous in the late 1980s and 1990s, increasing pressures for political change would also begin to emerge. In 1986, much of the Filipino populace rose up in the EDSA revolution, ousting President Marcos from power. The end of the 1980s would also see the United Nations take an active role in rebuilding Cambodia after the devastating rule of the Khmer Rouge. In 1997, the Asian Financial Crisis struck, and several regimes would also come under pressure. Suharto buckled under major protests, and Indonesia eventually democratized, while the Malaysian government, coming under similar stress, ultimately rode through the storm and remained in power.

To be sure, even as some states experienced pressure for political change after the Cold War, other states remained firmly authoritarian. Vietnam, for example, undertook significant economic reforms from the mid-1980s but only limited political reforms. Singapore too remained a hegemonic party state dominated by the PAP, which has never lost an election since the country’s founding. The Malaysian protests led by Anwar Ibrahim were ultimately silenced as the regime removed him as a threat by accusing him of sodomy. And despite the UN and the international community’s central role, Cambodia has largely fallen under the strongman rule of Hun Sen. And since becoming an independent state in 1983, Brunei has remained a sultanate with limited political change.

Two additional developments toward democratization in contemporary Southeast Asia are worth highlighting. In the wake of Suharto’s fall in Indonesia, the international community called for East Timor’s independence after Indonesian occupation for over two decades. In a referendum in 1999, the Timorese ultimately did vote for independence and developed a semi-presidential representative system, which has remained in place, despite instability and violence in ensuing years. Also, Myanmar has begun an unexpected series of political reforms, including competitive elections, since 2010. While the military still retains a great deal of control, the elections in 2010 and more recently in 2015 have been deemed genuine, free, and fair.

Southeast Asia’s historical legacy highlights the complex and shifting nature of political change in the region. As a whole, it remains recalcitrant to democratization but has experienced extensive political change, including developments supporting and undermining political reform. Given this, how have scholars tried to explain and theorize democratization and political change in the region more generally? The next sections put forth competing approaches to understanding regional politics, highlighting economic, cultural, and institutional approaches.

Southeast Asian democratization in context

This chapter uses three different lenses to understand the region’s democratization or lack thereof. Economic approaches highlight the materialist dimensions of political change, whether through development or class-based politics. Cultural approaches explore the roles of identity and how they help shape political outcomes. Institutions show us how the rules and norms of political organization can also have a critical impact on political change and continuity. In weighing each approach, this chapter looks to concrete cases in the region that highlight the promise and limitations of each approach. The point here is not to embrace any one approach as superior but to highlight how different lenses help us to see different aspects of political change, democratization, and authoritarian durability.
Modernization theory is one of the earliest and most influential theories in comparative politics generally and also influenced early studies of Southeast Asian politics. Arguments around modernization emerged in the 1950s and 1960s as scholars and policy makers faced a new global terrain shaped by the aftermath of World War II. Decolonization proceeded apace, and as new states emerged on the world map, new questions emerged about how these new states would fare politically and economically.

Less a single theory than a general approach, the basic idea behind modernization is that as states move from “traditional” to modern societies through economic development, they will undergo rapid change in their social, political, and economic structures. From this basic premise, modernization has several flavors. Some argue that economic growth and the embrace of capitalism would lead through a series of stages to democratization. As famously noted, “the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy” (Lipset 1959, 75). Others cautioned that modernization could also have destabilizing effects without proper institutions to guide political agendas (Huntington 1968). Yet others explored the dilemmas traditional societies had as they moved from traditional to modern systems.

In the 1950s and 1960s, as Southeast Asian studies itself began developing into a coherent field of study, policy makers and scholars argued that modernization could lead to stable democratic national states in Southeast Asia. Scholars saw communist insurgency in the region as a function of those alienated by modernization and thus drawn to the communist ideology as a way to cope with that vacuum (Pye 1981). Much of this scholarship came to be tied in with policies to fight communism in the region through US government initiatives, such as counterinsurgency and strategic hamletting (Berger 2003).

Other less explicitly politicized versions of a modernization approach focused on the dilemmas of modernization by exploring the role of political elites. These elites straddled the line between “traditional” and modern institutions, while much of the rest of the society remained much more deeply “traditional,” thereby producing what scholars would call an “elite–mass gap” (Weiner 1965, 2). In Thailand, for example, Fred Riggs (1966) observed the workings of what he called a “bureaucratic polity” where modern bureaucratic administration emerged disproportionate to other institutions a concept also applied later to Indonesia (Jackson and Pye 1978, 4). In these kinds of polities, the weakening or destruction of traditional bases of power left states in an institutional limbo that was neither traditional nor modern, and at the mercy of a “parasitic office holding class” (Riggs 1966).

Addressing the challenges of modernization in Malaysia, Scott (1968) argued that elites tended to compete for resources under the assumption of a “constant pie” and therefore tended to think in terms of distributive justice than in more liberal notions of democratic ideal. In Indonesia, Emmerson (1976) explored the backgrounds and ideologies of bureaucratic and legislative elites to find the ascendance of a more powerful bureaucracy within the context of an authoritarian state.

Later studies on the politics of modernization moved away from the emphasis on the elites and the bureaucracy, and paid more attention to other institutions. These works cautioned about the instability that could form under processes of modernization. In the Philippines where a strong bureaucracy never developed, the imbalance between exclusive access to elite decision-making and a relatively open participatory political system led to the constitutional crisis in 1972 (Wurfel, 1991). Similar patterns emerged in Thailand where a series of coups in the 1970s and 1980s illustrated the emergence and fraying of an alliance between the
Democratization and the lack thereof

bureaucracy and the military. As the power of bureaucracy declined, the role of business associations emerged and began to influence policy making (Laothamatas 1994).

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, significant economic growth ushered in a revival of the modernization approaches of the 1950s and 1960s. Under economic growth in Southeast Asia, Kearney argued that economic, technological, and social changes lead to processes such as the growth of literacy, increased exposure to mass communications, increased territorial mobility, the emergence of new occupations, and the emergence and spread of wage labor and production for the market (Kearney 1975, 5).

Southeast Asian states, including the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia, experienced these kinds of changes, but in an important revision, the relationship between economic growth and democratization is not linear but curvilinear (Morley and Crouch 1999). Economic growth does not lead states to give up power as social forces grow stronger; rather, it causes them to hold on to power as long as possible, and only at higher levels of growth, when the balance has finally tipped, they argue, does democratization succeed (Morley and Crouch 1999, 327). Furthermore, they acknowledge that their theory is ultimately only probabilistic and that other factors will also play a role in political change.

Modernization approaches have had an ineffable imprint on the study of political change and democratization in the region. Its locus of attention has shifted from the elite-mass gap to the implications of economic growth on the general populace. But modernization’s version of political change contrasts with another economic approach, namely Marxist class-based explanations.

Class-based approaches

In addition to modernization approaches, a second economic approach adopted class as an analytic framework to understand political change. At first glance, class-centered approaches resemble modernization theory in their shared materialist foundations. But while modernization theory emerged from the idea of transforming “traditional” societies to “modern” ones, Marxist approaches highlight the role classes play in promoting their own material interests and how they align with other classes in that context.

Historians have argued extensively about the rise of the capitalist class in the region, including in Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines. In Thailand, the integration in world markets and industrialization that led to the emergence of the capitalist class by the late 1950s (Hewison, 1989). In Indonesia, the capitalist class emerged in the 1970s though policies of import substitution industrialization (Robison, 1986). In the Philippines, an older agricultural elite effectively controlled much of state economic policy even under Marcos’s regime in the 1960s and 1970s (Hawes, 1987).

More recently, scholars have argued that these capitalist classes have effectively formed oligarchies despite political change, and even under democratization, state power remains monopolized by economic elites (Winters 2011). For example, although Indonesia transformed from an authoritarian state to an electoral democracy after 1998, the economic elites nurtured under the Suharto regime survived Suharto and adjusted to operate in a democratic context (Robison and Hadiz, 2004). The Philippines is the classic case where after the fall of Marcos, the political system reverted to a “cacique democracy” where political power continued to be held by large landowning families who rotate political power in the presidency and the legislature (Anderson 1988).

Oligarchic theories of power tend to suggest continuity of an economic class despite change in political structures, but they say less about how political systems change and the
Ehito Kimura

role economic classes play in that context. In comparative politics, Barrington Moore (1966) famously argued that it was the interaction between landed aristocracy and an emerging capitalist class led to varying political and economic outcomes in Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and China (Moore 1966). John Sidel transposes Moore’s argument to Southeast Asia by arguing that the emerging bourgeois class as represented by ethnic Chinese, and their relationship to the state explain the region’s variation in democratization. Specifically, Sidel argues that states in the region need to be understood in terms of “the degree of vigor and independence enjoyed by a given country’s bourgeoisie” (Sidel 2008, 29). Where the ethnic Chinese capitalist class has been assimilated (the Philippines and Thailand), democracy is allegedly strongest. Where the Chinese were considered “pariah capitalists,” authoritarianism continued. The other countries in the region are discounted for lacking a strong domestic bourgeois, either due to slow industrial growth (Burma, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam) or the strength of foreign and state capital (Brunei and Singapore) (Sidel 2008, 134).

The Philippines at first glance seems to provide a robust case of the middle-class instrumentalism in the process of democratization especially with the overthrow of the Marcos regime (Rivera 2011). Though the EDSA revolution involved a broad coalition including the Catholic Church, broad factions of the left, and ultimately, reformist wings of the military, the ousting of Marcos in 1986 suggests how the middle class could spur and embody a People Power revolution.

Thailand too has been cited as a place where the rising capitalist classes have had a marked impact on democratization. Anderson argues in “Murder and Progress” “that most of the echelons of the bourgeoisie—from the multimillionaire bankers of Bangkok to the ambitious small entrepreneurs of the provincial towns—have decided that the parliamentary system is the system that suits them best” while acknowledging that there are still challenges to this system in the provincial areas of Thailand in particular (Anderson 1990, 46).

However, in both Thailand and the Philippines, the middle-class argument has also come under scrutiny. In 2001, the middle class also mobilized again in the streets, this time to oust a sitting president, Estrada (Labrador 2001). To that end, the middle class demonstrated a fickleness about what kind of leader they wanted to support and what kind they would not. Middle classes in Thailand have been adamantly antidemocratic forces, pushing for constitutional revisions that would restrict rather than expand the franchise (Hewison 2014).

In fact, some scholars warned in the early 1990s that the robust growth in Southeast Asian economies would not necessarily translate to democratic change (Hewison, Robison, and Rodan 1993). Scholars thus have explored the cases recognizing that middle and working classes may very well support democracy when it suits their interests but tend to be “contingent” depending on varied factors. For example, middle classes tend to weigh state dependence and “fear,” and so in places like Indonesia, high levels of state dependence and fear effectively meant that middle classes preferred authoritarianism to democracy (Bellin, 2000).

Overall, class-based arguments about the process of democratization or the lack thereof in much of the region do have a great deal of sway. The lack of a vibrant middle class likewise has often been used to argue against the emergence of democracy in the likes of Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam. However, like modernization theory, there is also stark variation in the region. The role of the middle class while providing strong evidence for democratization in some places is complicated by examples in other places where they have been divided, weak, or even unwilling advocates for democracy, for example, in the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, and even Malaysia.

Both modernization and class-based approaches are materialist explanations of political change. Though they differ in their inherent logic, they both rely heavily on economic
factors in explaining democratization. But materialist explanations have run into the empirical reality of Southeast Asia, which contradicts some of the expected findings, especially around the reality that some of the places with the highest development tend to be much less democratic than other regions. The next section explores noneconomic factors, namely culture as a way to understand democratization and political processes in the region.

**Cultural explanations**

In contrast to economic approaches, cultural approaches emphasize the importance of shared values, traditions, beliefs, and behaviors as a way of understanding how political change and continuity occur. Scholars of politics and democracy have sometimes been uncomfortable addressing the relationship between culture and politics in part because of the history of racism and colonialism and the risk of essentializing and othering complex groups and societies. This holds true in Southeast Asia as much as any other part of the non-Western world. In the region, three strands of cultural arguments can be distinguished: the idea of “Asian Values,” arguments around “civic culture,” and ethno-religious politics.

Asian Values, as articulated by its proponents, consist of a set of foundational social and cultural values supposedly distinctive to the region and contrasted with “Western” values. These values included loyalty to the family, community over individual, development and security over individual rights, consensus over majority rule, and the importance of social harmony (Robison 1996). These values then reflect political practices that are characterized by patron–client communitarianism, personalism, authority, and strong parties and states (Neher 1994).

There is both an intellectual and political context to the rise of the “Asian Values” debate. Politically, the concept emerged in tandem with the rise of the “Asian Tigers” in the 1990s when the region was growing at a rapid pace. As global and domestic pressures for political change began to emerge, leaders such as Lee Kwan Yew of Singapore and Mohammad Mahathir of Malaysia defended their authoritarian regimes on cultural grounds (Zakaria 1994). Leaders also grasped the mantle of nationalism by criticizing what they saw as the declining West characterized by majoritarian, individualistic, materialistic, and morally questionable social values.

Aside from Asian Values, there have been any number of other permutations of democracy labeled variously by regional leaders or scholars as the “Burmese Way,” “Guided Democracy,” “Thai-Style Democracy,” or “Confucian Democracy.” What makes the Asian Values thesis distinctive is its overt political agenda but also the way that it implies a fairly uniform set of values in a large and diverse region. In fact, one of the key challenges to the Asian Values perspective has to do with the question of what exactly constitutes Asia. While some aspects of East Asian culture may indeed reflect a more cultural inclination toward hierarchical rule, painting the whole region as such defies the lived experience of large swaths of populations in the region.

On the other hand, more specific kinds of cultural approaches have sought to understand politics in the region without painting the region with a broad brush. In Bali, Geertz (1980) saw kingship as a performative spectacle infused with local cultural practices or a “theater state.” In Indonesia, “Javanese” notions of power contrast starkly with Western notions and are conceptualized as “concrete, homogeneous, constant in total quantity, and without inherent moral implications as such” (Anderson 1972, 18). The collapse of constitutional democracy in Indonesia could only be understood “by taking into account the deep roots, the longevity as well as the remarkable resilience of that Hindu-Javanese world to foreign, e.g. Islamic and Western, influences” (Benda 1964, 454).
Furthermore, there are what we might call “indigenous” roots of antiauthoritarianism and practices of proto-democratic ideas in Southeast Asia as well (Thompson 2015, 876). Key figures in the region refer to religious traditions, including Islam and Buddhism to defend democracy, rejecting that it is purely an outside perspective (Bstan-dzin-rgya-mtsho 1999, 3). Historically, in Southeast Asia, there has been evidence of accountability and pluralism, including systems of “dual monarchs” or “second kings” in some parts of mainland Southeast Asia and the Malay world (Reid 1988, 264). As Kim Dae Jung noted, accountability, meritocracy, freedom of speech, and “people-based politics” made appearances in Asia “long before Locke” (Jung 1994).

The idea of Asian Values as a concept seems to have lost its sway since the late 1990s, perhaps in part due to the Asian Financial Crisis and the end of rapid growth in the region. Some of the key proponents of this view are no longer influential leaders in the region, Lee Kwan Yew, the key spokesman for Asia Values died in 2015. This is not to suggest that culture does not matter, only that the Asian Values thesis ignored the variety and multiplicity of culture and the way that it can interact with politics.

Civic culture and democracy

In addition to Asian or more localized ethnic or religious culture, scholars have also looked at “civic culture” and the role that this plays in democracy. Influenced by the work of Alexis de Tocqueville, who argued that American’s civic life explained the robustness of its democracy, more recent scholars have taken up the mantle (Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti 1993). While initial studies such as this have been conducted in Europe and the United States, scholars have also begun to look at the role of civic culture and social capital in other places around the world, including Asia.

In Indonesia for example, scholars have explored how Muslims and Muslim organizations helped to usher Suharto out and democracy in. Democracy “depends heavily on local cultural resources” (Hefner 2000, 5), and Indonesia’s “rich civic precedents” helped to usher along the “world’s largest movement for a democratic and pluralist Islam” (Hefner 2000, 6). In essence, there is an equivalent Habermasian “public sphere” in the Muslim world consistent with and drawing on religious ideas and practices. “Civil pluralist Islam,” which affirms democracy, voluntarism, and a balance of countervailing powers in a state and society (Hefner 2000, 13).

In the same vein, Indonesia’s democracy arguably “punches above its socio-economic weight” due to the flourishing associational life (Lussier and Fish, 2012). Through survey research, the authors show that Indonesians report being members of civic associations at a significantly higher rate than their counterparts in the region. In particular, Indonesians are part of neighborhood associations as well as religious groups at very high rates, and the authors argue that this cultivates democracy by cultivating a sense of efficacy, developing and transferring civic skills, and offering recruitment mechanisms for political participation (Lussier and Fish 2012).

In the Philippines, a contrasting argument is made, namely that although there is a social capital of shared norms, those values and networks tend to act as barriers rather than catalysts for democracy and economic development (Putzel 1999, 217). Social capital that emerges from familial relations is distinct from those that accrue out of civic associations, and the Philippines is characterized by the former (Putzel 1999, 203).

Arguments about civic culture and social capital draw in and build upon the earlier notions of culture and highlight how discussions about civic culture and social capital and their
role in the process of democratization and political change have generated some interest, but there has yet to be a deep and systematic study of “civic culture” and democratization throughout the region.

**Ethnic and religious diversity and democracy**

A third area where cultural arguments have emerged in relation to democracy and politics in the region has less to do with the values of a particular culture but rather about how different ethnic and religious groups coexist amidst what Furnivall called “plural societies” (Furnivall 1956). Some approaches in comparative politics have taken this approach quite literally by simply measuring the number of ethnic groups in a particular state and measuring the corresponding level of democracy in that state. However, the findings have never been thoroughly convincing. Some have argued that the more ethnic fractionalization in a country, the less likely for democracy to succeed (Rabushka and Shepsle 1972). Others have argued that ethnic diversity may enhance democracy or have no effect at all (Crouch 1993).

In Southeast Asia, empirically there does not seem to be a consistent pattern. It is on the one hand regionally one of the most diverse places in the world in terms of culture, language, and religion. Indonesia has a very high level of ethnic diversity and has had its fair share of ethnic conflict, but it is currently also a leading democracy in the region. Cambodia tends to be more homogenous but cannot be characterized as democratic. That said, the issue of ethnicity and identity within the state is an important factor in understanding political processes in the region.

To cite one example, ethnic and communal politics and the concern of racial instability form part of the justification for the hegemonic party state systems in Singapore and Malaysia. Both countries have faced a history of race riots particularly between the Malays and the Chinese, which resulted in Singapore’s expulsion from Malaysia and the rise in Malaysia of racialized coalition politics. In Malaysia today, Islam and politics play a more complicated role as well. The Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) has moved more to the political center in that country, while to counter the strength of the pro-democracy movements the United Malay Nationalist Organization (UMNO), the main government party, has initiated counter-mobilization of religious and political elites (Hefner 2015, 177).

Ethnic tensions and conflict have plagued Indonesia in a variety of ways, including violence against ethnic Chinese but also between ethnic groups in Maluku and Ambon, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and other regions. Regional and territorial conflicts from Aceh, East Timor, to Papua have also been characterized in ethnic and religious terms as well. Myanmar too has had a long history of state conflict with ethnic groups and continues to face pressure and international criticism for treatment of religious and ethnic minorities (Kipgen 2013).

In fact, even as Civil Islam was a force for democratization, a variety of strains of Islam in the region have included some that have tended toward of illiberal policies as well. Indonesia has been criticized for the treatment of Achmadiyah, a small fringe sect in Islam criticized by other Muslim organizations (Crisisgroup 2008), and it has also faced a number of terror attacks by groups, such as Jemaah Islamiyah, that have sought to promote a regional caliphate in place of Indonesia’s pluralist democracy. Insurgent groups in Thailand’s southern region as well as in the Philippines have also posed tensions with the government labeling the groups as terrorists, while critics point to heavy-handed tactics of the government as well undermining their ostensible commitment to human rights (Thompson 2015).

Without dismissing the role of culture in politics, the literature seems to suggest that it does not form a uniform obstacle to democratization as some have suggested. Instead, it is clear that culture has shaped the political process in the region in a number of different ways.
that have been both supportive of democracy and also a hindrance. Furthermore, culture seems to play a wide variety of roles depending on how it is conceptualized.

**Institutions**

As scholars of comparative politics became more critical of materialist and culturalist kinds of explanations, they began to shift their attention toward the role of institutions. Broadly, institutions are the “rules of the game” in which the rules, norms, and practices of governing affect key political outcomes. The central political institution in comparative politics is the state, but also important are militaries, political parties, legislatures, and electoral institutions.

States in Southeast Asia have been variously described as patrimonial, sultanistic, prebendal, and personalistic. Borrowing from Max Weber, these terms represent the ways in which political leaders mobilize resources for personal and political gain. For example, in Indonesia, Suharto used the patrimonial distribution of the spoils of office as a means of maintaining political authority and stability, a process dubbed “neo-patrimonialism” (Crouch 1978). In the Philippines, the Marcos regime was referred to as a sultanistic regime, a highly personalized and uninstitutionalized form of rule where the ruler extracts resources for personal gain (Thompson 1995). Even after Marcos, the country continues to be characterized by its weak state, which the political and economic elite routinely plunder (Anderson 1988).

The difference between the Philippines and Indonesia appears to be that while power was almost exclusively personalized under Marcos in the Philippines, the Indonesian state was strengthened and supported by other institutions, such as the military and political parties. In fact, experiences in Southeast Asia suggest varied roles for militaries. In both the Philippines and in Thailand, the military played a key role in enforcing authoritarian rule. Ferdinand Marcos, for example, imposed martial law and began arresting political enemies and putting down social unrest with the military. In Thailand, the military periodically has also stepped in to put down social and political unrest and frequently engaged in coups to overthrow the democratically elected regime. But in neither of the countries did the military become a cohesive and institutional apparatus of the state.

In contrast, Indonesia’s and Myanmar’s authoritarian regimes can be characterized as military dictatorships par excellence. In Burma, the *tatmadaw*’s focus on internal rather than external enemies helped to consolidate and to cohere the military into a durable state institution (Callahan 2004). Indonesian General Suharto gained the reigns of the military in the wake of the alleged coup attempt in 1965, deftly outmaneuvering President Sukarno and placing the military at the center of state power over the next thirty years.

Another key institution scholars have explored is the role of political parties. Single party or hegemonic party states, as exemplified by Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, and even Laos, suggest that one party is able to dominate the politics in that country and that they are able to retain power for a significant amount of time. Taking the argument a step further, Slater argues that “strong parties might effectively forestall democratization when they are combined with strong states” (Slater 2006, 17). Slater shows that in Singapore, Vietnam, Laos, and even Cambodia, parties and states are effectively fused together, and the party is able to control the economic, political, and human resources to keep firm command over the state apparatus (Slater 2006, 17).

Parties, of course, operate in the context of legislatures, yet another key institution that scholars have pointed out that helps explain democratic change and authoritarian durability. The way the legislatures are designed, the rules of the game, and where key obstacles lie can all have a dramatic effect on political outcomes. Politics in the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 and shows how institutions with
more veto players tended to have more policy stability than places with fewer veto players (MacIntyre 2003). Others have argued that hybrid regimes tend to have stronger legislatures more willing to hold the executive accountable, than new democracies, ironically helping to sustain the undemocratic aspects of hybrid regimes as well (Case 2015).

Finally, scholars have also identified the importance of electoral institutions. Despite the relative lack of democracies in Southeast Asia, it is notable that most of the states in the region do hold elections. Elections are constitutional ways that democracies seek to ensure accountability of their leaders. They are also ways that authoritarian or semi-authoritarian leaders gain legitimacy. In fact, the electoral institutions in the region differ markedly, and scholars have pointed out their potential problems. In Singapore for example, the PAP has a systematic advantage that is embedded in the rules. The government draws electoral district boundaries, the government regularly intimidates and prosecutes opposition candidates, and it punishes districts and neighborhoods that don’t vote for the PAP by withholding government services and delaying upgrades. In other countries, elections are also accompanied by patronage and also different kinds of violence that damage the credibility of the elections. In Thailand’s 2014 election, supporters of the yellow shirt movement disrupted elections eventually leading to a renewed military coup in 2014 (Kongkirati 2016).

Overall, institutional approaches have added a great deal of richness to the study of political change and continuity. The earlier discussion is not meant to offer a comprehensive overview but is instead intended to show the variety of ways in which different scholars have considered institutions as a way of thinking about democratization and political changes in the region.

Conclusion

Given the varied approaches that we have explored in this chapter, how should we think about the experience of democratization in the region? Is there any one theory or approach that fits to explain the region as a whole? Or do we need to understand democratization as something that is simply un-theorizable and ungeneralizable? These are two starkly different ways of conceptualizing how to understand politics in the region. What is more likely true is that conceptual approaches and theories help us to highlight important engines of change and continuity, but they need to be understood in the context of complex realities on the ground.

To the degree that theories of democratization can help us explain empirical reality, they will be partial at best. Each case of democratization will have several different factors at play and depend on the particular historical, social, political, and economic circumstances. All-encompassing explanations of democratization are probably futile, but studies do help to identify key and important factors that are at play.

There can be little doubt that economic development and economic classes matter, but their dynamics will probably interact with cultural and institutional factors as well. To that end, the scholarship of democratization in Southeast Asia complicates previous theories but also helps to tease out these experiences. It also makes sense that this scholarship is for the most part dealing in probabilistic tendencies rather than clear-cut finalities. Agency and happenstance cannot be eliminated from our understanding of the region.

References


