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Andrew McGregor, Lisa Law, Fiona Miller

Neoliberalism in Southeast Asia

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Neoliberalism is a slippery concept. The term is generally conceived as a new set of political, economic and social arrangements that place their emphasis on market relations, minimal states and individual responsibility. Neoliberalism has largely replaced earlier labels that referred to specific politicians and or political projects (Larner 2009), and has since become an identifier for a seemingly ubiquitous collection of market-oriented policies that are blamed for a wide range of social, political, ecological and economic ills. Critical scholars have taken up the mantle, examining the connections between neoliberalism and a vast collection of conceptual categories, including cities (Hackworth 2007; Leitner et al. 2007), citizenship (Ong 2007; Sparke 2006), development (Hart 2002; Power 2003), gender (Brown 2004; Oza 2006), homelessness (Klodawsky 2009; May et al. 2005), labor (Aguiar and Herod 2006; Peck 2002), migration (Lawson 1999; Mitchell 2004), nature (Bakker 2005; McCarthy and Prudham 2004), race (Haylett 2001; Goldberg 2009), sexualities (Oswin 2007; Richardson 2005), and violence (Springer 2008, 2012, 2015), which only begins to scratch the surface (Springer et al. 2016).

Given the massive academic industry that has sprung up in response to neoliberalism, it is perhaps easy to forget that the phenomenon itself is quite recent, and its entry into the affairs of Southeast Asia even more so. The policies that are today considered standard practice within the contemporary neoliberal toolkit, namely privatization, deregulation and liberalization, probably seemed incomprehensible as recent as 60 years ago. In the aftermath of the Second World War the global north was thoroughly enamored with Keynesian economics, and owing to the ruination wrought by the Nazis, right wing ideologies had fallen completely out of favor. Within Southeast Asia there was a rise in nationalist sentiment in the wake of the Second World War, where attempts at decolonization resulted in protracted struggles like the war in Vietnam. This history makes the ascendancy of neoliberalism all the more surprising, and particularly so within Southeast Asia where a growing skepticism for ‘Western’ influence was emerging. Yet in the intervening years neoliberalism nonetheless rose to become the contemporary ‘planetary vulgate’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2001). A number of scholars have traced the unfolding of neoliberalism (Duménil and Lévy 2004; Harvey 2005; Peck 2010), where the common thread that ties these accounts together is the notion of a distinct historical lineage.
to the development of neoliberalism. In short, neoliberalism came from somewhere, and its trajectories were largely purposeful. The roots of neoliberalism can be traced back to Europe and critiques of nineteenth-century laissez-faire (Peck 2008). Given the broader currents of Southeast Asian's history in relation to European colonialism, neoliberalism is positioned from its outset as a colonial appendage in the region. A key starting point for the idea is the ‘Colloque Walter Lippmann’ of 1938, where a group of 26 prominent liberal thinkers, including Friedrich Hayek, Michael Polanyi, Louis Rougier, Wilhelm Röpke and Alexander Rüstow, met in Paris to discuss Lippmann’s (1937-2005) book *The Good Society*. Their goal was to reinvigorate classical liberalism and in particular its emphasis on the economic freedoms of the individual. The participants discussed potential names for their new philosophy of liberalism, eventually settling on ‘neoliberalism,’ giving the term both a birthday and an address (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009). The publication of Hayek’s (1944/2001) *The Road to Serfdom* was one of the first products of this meeting, establishing him as a primary intellectual engineer of the ‘neoliberal counter-revolution,’ signaling a backlash against Keynesianism and its emphasis on low interest rates and government investment in infrastructure. Hayek had a profound influence over neoliberalism’s various apostles, including the Chicago School of Economics’ most (in)famous intellectual, Milton Friedman, and former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Margaret Thatcher. From there, the diffusion of neoliberalism may have seemed somewhat assured, as ‘trickle-down economics’ soon caught the attention of United States President Ronald Reagan, and much like Thatcher, neoliberalism became the defining feature of his time in office. Yet an initial explanation for the contemporary ‘triumph’ of neoliberalism is that the original group of neoliberals bought and paid for their own regressive ‘Great Transformation’ (Polanyi 1944).

Neoliberals understood that their ideas could, with time and relentless cultivation among political elites, have very material consequences (George 1999). The Colloque Walter Lippmann recognized that they would need to proselytize their ideas through formal channels, an idea that was given life when many of the original Paris participants reconvened in Switzerland for the founding of the Mont Pèlerin Society in 1947, the first of many neoliberal think tanks. From here, the group founded a platform for constructing an international network of institutes, foundations, research centers and journals to promote and advance neoliberal knowledge (Plehwe and Walpen 2006). The success of this campaign was not simply its growing virility among intellectuals, but rather its achievements hinged on the geographic dispersion of neoliberal discourse across multiple spaces of institutional engagement, including academia, business, politics and media. Getting political elites to buy into the idea was a key concern, and if David Harvey’s (2005) theory of neoliberalism as a reconstitution of class power has merit, then this consideration represents a significant portion of neoliberalism’s success story, including its penetration into Southeast Asian societies.

The rationale for this uptake in Southeast Asia is the primary contribution this chapter seeks to make. I begin by tracing some of the history of neoliberalism’s diffusion into the region, highlighting the use of both ‘shock’ tactics and debt crisis as conduits to economic reform. In the following section I examine the limitations of democracy in the context of Southeast Asia’s cultural proclivity for patronage and the ways in which this allows neoliberalism to be significantly manipulated into the service of elite interests. I then focus in on the authoritarian character that neoliberalism takes on within conditions of minimal accountability, a situation that is ripe for spurning social conflict. In the conclusion I emphasize the hybridity of neoliberalism and the limitations of adopting a regional perspective to a concept that continues to shift as it moves through different political, cultural, social and institutional fields.
Neoliberalism in Southeast Asia

A brief history of neoliberalism in Southeast Asia

In spite of all the early behind the scenes networking that eventually gave rise to neoliberalism, the economic theory remained in a state of virtual hibernation with respect to public policy for a number of years. It needed a flashpoint to ignite its slow burning intellectual fuse into a tangible political reality. The 1970s set neoliberalism aflame, as it was strategically poised to explode when a financial crisis hit. Between 1973 and 1979, world oil prices rose dramatically, setting off an economic recession on the global north, while the Soviet Block was derailed, careening into an economic tailspin that eventually led to its disappearance. For the global south a ‘debt crisis’ ensued, triggering a widespread condition of aid dependency that continues to this day. These disruptions to the global economy denoted the start of an economic paradigm shift away from Keynesianism and toward neoliberalism. Global north politicians, governments and citizens alike became increasingly disillusioned with the record of state involvement in social and economic life, leading to a growing acceptance of neoliberalism’s primary proclamation: the most efficient economic regulator is to ‘leave things to the market.’ In Southeast Asia, governments had not yet been able to take advantage of neoliberal reform in the way the global north was able to, owing to its diffusion from Europe at a time when ideas didn’t travel as quickly as they do today, however the so-called ‘East Asian Miracle’ touted by the World Bank would soon change that. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) first came together in 1967, anticipating that capitalism would triumph in the Cold War standoff, where Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore initially hedged their bets. Initially these countries were thought to have been following a ‘developmental state’ type of model, which seemed to diverge from the theories of neoliberalism. While being market-based, the state was nonetheless prepared to actively intervene in economic processes in order to produce favorable conditions for local economic growth. As has become clearer in recent years, this can fit within neoliberal theory, where apparent neoliberal state ‘roll-back’ always and inevitably comes with further state ‘roll-out’ (Peck and Tickell 2002). Indeed, this feature is now considered as one of the defining contradictions between neoliberal-in–theory and ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ as a grounded empirical reality (Brenner and Theodore 2002). While the situation in Southeast Asia was at the time characterized by a significant degree of state-led development, the point is, this sort of orientation was easily accommodated within a neoliberal approach.

Among neoliberalism’s defining, vanguard projects were Thatcherism in the UK and Reaganomics in the United States. Following this, more moderate forms of neoliberalism were unfurled in traditionally social-democratic countries like Canada, New Zealand, and Germany. But it was Chile’s trauma that provided the lynchpin of turning this emergent economic theory into a grounded political development, and the country is widely recognized as the first state-level neoliberal experiment. In 1973, on the ‘other 9-11,’ the US government helped to orchestrate a coup that saw a despotic hand under Pinochet replace the country’s elected socialist government (Challies and Murray 2008). This installation provided the model for what Naomi Klein (2007) refers to as the ‘shock doctrine,’ where collective crises or disasters, whether naturally occurring or manufactured, are used to push through neoliberal policies at precisely the moment when societies are too disoriented to organize meaningful contestation. Following the Chilean experiment, ‘shock’ tactics became the principle means of delivery in neoliberalism’s selective exportation from the global north to the global south. Cambodia offers a case in point inasmuch as neoliberal reform was actually a mandated outcome of the United Nations peace agreement of the early 1990s following the Khmer Rouge atrocities and a decade of Vietnamese occupation (Springer 2010, 2015). When the Iron Curtain fell in 1989, the global political climate shifted and the aftermath of the Cambodian genocide could finally be addressed.
Cambodians only longed for peace, and the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) promised to give it to them, but in presiding over the country’s transition, the population was not consulted or allowed to vote on what sort of economic policy would come into effect, and instead a particular version of free-market neoliberal economics was simply installed (Springer 2011).

Elsewhere in Southeast Asia the growing debt crisis opened a window of opportunity for neoliberalism as neocolonial relationships of aid dependency were fostered though the auspices of US-influenced multilateral agencies like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Loan dispersals and subsequent rescheduling hinged on conditionalities that subjected recipient countries to intervention, which reorganized their economies along neoliberal lines. Indonesia serves as the best example of the employment of this approach, where the country was compelled by the IMF to accept a US$43 billion bailout package to restore market confidence in the Indonesian rupiah, and in exchange the Indonesian government agreed to reduce energy and food subsidies, raise interest rates, and close 16 privately owned banks. The approach failed, as the bank closures triggered a run on other banks with people withdrawing their savings as the rupiah started to spiral downward leading to food hoarding (MacIntyre 1999). Nonetheless, neoliberal economics were packaged, marketed and sold to the global south as a series of nostrums that once implemented through the freeing of market forces, would supposedly lead to a prosperous future, where all of the world’s peoples would come to live in a unified, harmonious ‘global village.’ Although neoliberalism’s utopian promise was an empty one from its outset, powerful elites in countries across the region, and indeed the world, have only been too happy to oblige, as neoliberalism often opens up opportunities for well-connected government officials to informally control market and material rewards, thus allowing them to easily line their own pockets (Springer 2009). An extraordinary collection of regulatory reforms came with each consecutive wave of neoliberalism’s dispersion. Beyond seeking to deregulate markets, advance ‘free’ trade and promote unobstructed capital mobility, neoliberalism typically includes the following finer points: it seeks to impede all forms of public expenditure and collective initiative through the imposition of user fees and the privatization of commonly held assets; to position individualism, competitiveness and economic self-sufficiency as incontestable virtues; to decrease or rescind all forms of social protections, welfare and transfer programs while promoting minimalist taxation and negligible business regulation; to control inflation even at the expense of full employment; and to actively push marginalized peoples into a flexible labor market regime of low-wage employment, where labor relations are unencumbered by unionization and collective bargaining (Peck 2001; Peck and Tickell 2002). These features have all become part of the Southeast Asian political economic landscape in recent years, where countries within the region have, to varying degrees, employed such policies. This ranges from the privatization of municipal water supplies in the Philippines, to union breaking tactics in Cambodia, to corporate tax holidays on light industry and electronics in Thailand, to the individualism of Kiasu culture in Singapore and its key characteristic of hyper-competitiveness. It should be emphasized that there is not a single model of neoliberalism in the region; instead each country has adopted neoliberal reforms in a piecemeal fashion that reflects unique political priorities and differing institutional matrixes.

Neoliberal patronage and the limits of democracy

For all the ideological purity of free market rhetoric, the actual practice of neoliberalism is inherently marked by contradictions and compromise (Peck 2010). This inconsistent character is precisely what made it so easy for the World Bank to shift its tone of espousing states
like Singapore and Malaysia as models of neoliberal development prior to 1997, and then in
the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis, lambaste them as ‘developmental states’ that were
not following the assigned script. Although the underlying assumptions of neoliberalism and its
naturalization of market relations remain largely constant, neoliberalism in its ‘actually existing’
circumstances (Brenner and Theodore 2002) has nonetheless varied greatly in terms of its dos-
ages among regions, states, and cities, where and when it has been adopted. This includes the
use of strong ‘developmental’ states to ram through markets when and where desired, but to
intervene when deemed necessary. This situation really is no different than the supposed tem-
plate state for neoliberalism, as the United States is in reality one of the most self-serving and
protectionist economies in the world. Since elites have so much to gain by rigging the system,
both in America and in Southeast Asia, neoliberalism has become an officially sanctioned racket,
which promises improved lives for all, but in fact simply exacerbates inequalities by entrenching
class difference (Gilbert 2014; Wade 2004). The various ways in which neoliberalism has been
manipulated by local officials is part of its ‘success’ story. This chameleon-like pliability means that
we must go beyond conceiving of ‘neoliberalism in general’ as a singular and fully realized policy
regime, ideological form or regulatory framework, and work toward conceiving a plurality of
hybridized or articulated neoliberalisms, with particular and unique characteristics arising from
variable geohistorical outcomes. What constitutes ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ in any given
Southeast Asian state is distinct unto itself, even if we can see general patterns that arise from
similar and shared histories, cultures, and political structures. In particular, the deep roots of the
patronage system have been a particularly influential articulation across the region, as they work
so well with neoliberalism insofar as it allows local elites to co-opt, transform, and (re)articu-
late policies and reforms through a framework that enables favoritism in asset stripping public
resources (Springer 2010). This is one of the key criticisms of the IMF’s involvement in Indo-
nesia’s reform – its failure to address the patronage system. Suharto’s hold on power prior to the
financial crisis was maintained by offering powerful positions and/or monopolies to his family,
friends, and enemies in exchange for financial and political support (Robison and Rosser 2003).

While the earliest, proto-historical roots of neoliberalism in Southeast Asia can be traced
to the American interventions as part of its Cold War policies in the 1960s and 1970s, such as
supporting the takeover of Indonesia by Suharto from Soekarno in 1965 and backing the over-
throw of Philippine democracy by Ferdinand Marcos in 1972, neoliberalism as we currently
know it only became entrenched in the region in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis of
1997. In the wake of the Asian Crisis, the adoption of even greater neoliberal reforms in South-
east Asia has, by and large, simply meant that public monopoly became private monopoly while
the authoritarian structure of the state has remained intact (Robison et al. 2005), albeit under
new governments in many instances, notably Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia. This situation,
of course, constitutes a paradox, as neoliberal ideology presents itself as being in favor of democ-
raty (Harvey 2005). Yet in such transitional contexts, foreign and domestic pressures for the
privatization of national economies and the opening of borders to trade and capital movements
are far more prevalent than is support for democratization, accountability, and the economic
assistance needed to ease the impacts of poverty on populations (Tetreault 2003). Neoliberals
assuage their own misgivings by insisting that free markets constitute the necessary basis for
freedoms in other arenas, enabling a system in which economic and social power is dispersed
and able to accommodate numerous interests, and it is thus assumed as the most ideal way to
encourage democratic reform (Robison 2002). Yet there is room for cynicism, as an alternative
interpretation suggests that the best way to promote markets – particularly those that would
be open to ‘Western’ capital – is to develop democracy, as this would, in theory, dislodge the
poli toco-business oligarchies and patron favoritism advanced by an entrenched central authority.
Many Southeast Asian states are willing to play the lip-service game with regards to democracy, but when push comes to shove, they are only too happy to trample its norms. Actually existing neoliberalism in Southeast Asia, as in the United States and elsewhere, is not about a highroad approach to the morality of freedom, but is instead about getting the most for oneself through evoking such a feel-good rhetoric. Greed is its foundation, selfishness its core.

Democracy is easily one of the most abused words in the English language (Lummis 1996), so the (lack of) meaning of it in a neoliberal context is already moot. Indeed, it can be argued that ‘democracy’ offers no more of a solution to neoliberals than authoritarianism if it produces regimes where populist governments engage in policies of redistribution. Thus, from the outside, US democracy-promotion policies have sought to construct ‘low-intensity democracies’ across Southeast Asia, where elections do not subject rulers to pressures that might derail free market objectives (Robison 2004). Hence, for example, we see union-busting as a widespread practice in the region, as not only does it threaten the viability of locally produced goods on the global market, but so too do unions represent a mobilization of a politically active and democratically inclined population. In Stephen Gill’s (1995) terms, ‘disciplinary neoliberalism’ is the Southeast Asian mainstay, as it ensures that through a variety of regulatory, surveillance and policing mechanisms, neoliberal reforms are instituted and ‘locked in,’ despite what the population might actually want. Insofar as democracy is concerned, neoliberalism represents an erosion of democratic control and accountability. Again, this is as true for Southeast Asia as it is for other parts of the world, as a neoliberal agenda employs a variety of legal and constitutional devices that insulate it from popular scrutiny and demands (Overbeek 2000). This is exactly what happened in Cambodia under the UNTAC in the early 1990s, when a ‘liberal democracy’ and hence a free market economy were enshrined in the country’s new constitution with no prior public consultation (Springer 2010). At the same time, decision-makers who are privately motivated increasingly determine how public goods and services are distributed, or if they are to be sold off.

**Accountability and authoritarianism under neoliberalism**

The idea that neoliberalism is fundamentally unaccountable is further exemplified in the governance structures of the International Financial Institutions (IFIs). The IMF, for example, is completely unaccustomed to outside scrutiny and frequently responds to criticisms with defensive hubris (Bullard 2002). While democracy does not appear to have a place in their internal operations, outwardly this rhetoric is central in IFI discourse, touted as an imperative human value. This feature becomes most manifest in their criticisms of the failings of democracy in Southeast Asian countries where its reform policies have repeatedly resulted in social discontent and equally predictable authoritarian responses. This response, of course, begs the question, if the IFIs are themselves not democratic, accountable or transparent institutions, is their authority to make judgments on issues concerning democracy really tenable? Given the lack of introspection the IFIs display, it is not surprising that “the idea that authoritarian states could play a positive development role became attractive within the West at a time when growth rates lagged behind some Asian rates. . . . Within Western business circles many looked approvingly at the state’s role in sweeping aside ‘distributional coalitions’ (labor, welfare, and environmental groups) and instituting low tax regimes” (Rodan et al. 2001, 14). Thus, although the relationship between neoliberalism and democracy is far from straightforward, neoliberal reform is rife with opportunities for political and economic elites with strong commercial interest to influence development away from democracy (Jonsson 2002). As demands for greater neoliberal reform come from the global north, in order for Southeast Asian states to preserve the privileges of their
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ruling classes they must confront two options: 1) the establishment of a new social compromise of their own (to align larger segments of the population with the prosperity of the wealthiest), a condition antithetical to neoliberalism; or 2) a shift toward an increasingly authoritarian regime, a position that neoliberalism can easily accommodate and one that seems to have been repeated across the region (Duménil and Lévy 2004) – Cambodia offers a particularly compelling case in point (Springer 2010). Political repression is, as such, a commonplace feature of Southeast Asian neoliberalism, where the persecution of activists and non-governmental organizations continues to play a leading role in the reform processes since at least the time of the Asian Crisis. While some might be keen to emphasize that neoliberalism has not been universally negative inasmuch as within existing authoritarian regimes there has been some opening of electoral reform, I am not convinced that this is enough. Within the context of Cambodia I have argued against the idea of democracy being reduced to mere electoralism, and have instead prioritized a more radical democratic basis located in a politics of resistance (Springer 2015). Despite the repression that continues to be meted out against protesters, there is some room for hope here as grassroots social movements have started to take hold in Southeast Asia, ranging from identity politics and belonging to place among indigenous minority groups in Upland Southeast Asia, to women’s empowerment in response to forced evictions in Cambodia, to transnational labor activism, to the Red Shirt movement in Thailand (Parvanova and Pichler 2013).

That neoliberalism has coincided with a new and intensifying pattern of conflict, one that seems to be concerned with identity groups rather than the state is perhaps unsurprising given the ongoing exclusions of the poor and rising inequality (Rapley 2004). Contemporary political conflict is now predominantly within rather than between states (Demmers 2004; Desai 2006), which despite occasional territorial scuffles, such as the recent border conflict between Thailand and Cambodia over Preah Vihear, holds true in Southeast Asia. The bulk of conflict that does exist can be interpreted as a reflection of the geographic restructuring and uneven development that neoliberalism provokes (Harvey 2005). At the very least there is a new scalar logic, where particular cities like Phnom Penh and Manila have become the loci of development and investment, spurning mutually destructive place-making policies as cities strategically position themselves in favor of neoliberal policies. Meanwhile, peripheral areas are ignored, which makes individual countries prone to rural resentment and/or coveting of urban wealth. Marginalization of the rural frame is furthered as it becomes a site for extraction rather than investment, and differences can become magnified. Patterns of conflict can easily evolve among the dispossessed and downtrodden within the rural sphere in a competition for the scraps left at the neoliberal table among ‘underdogs’ (Uvin 2003), as ‘top dogs’ in the city meanwhile insulate themselves from reprisal through an ever-tightening security regime. This clampdown in Southeast Asia has come in the form the apparatus of the state, such as authoritarian showings of force in public space (Springer 2010), and private measures visible in the landscape, such as fenced properties patrolled by armed guards (Coleman 2004). Furthermore, any violence that bubbles up among underdogs engenders Orientalist discourses that problematically position ‘local’ cultures as being wholly responsible, erasing the contingency, fluidity and interconnectedness of the global political economy of violence. Such discourses license even more reform as neoliberalism is positioned as a ‘civilizing’ enterprise in the face of such purported ‘savagery’ (Springer 2015). The current implicit support for authoritarianism is not, of course, without historical precedent in Southeast Asia, but it is interesting to witness just how well neoliberalism is facilitated within this political landscape. We would do well to remember that following the Second World War and lodged within the prevailing rhetoric of modernization, the principal driver of American foreign policy was the threat to capitalism, not democracy (Rodan and Hewison 2004). Resistance to neoliberalism was to be expected as the state moved to ensure reforms, which required
the threat of immediate state violence to dissenters and equally necessitated that local elites be brought on board. This exact scenario has played out repeatedly across Southeast Asia.

Convincing local elites that neoliberal reforms such as deregulation and privatization will offer them an opportunity for enrichment is not too hard of a sell, and indeed there is some indication that the final holdout in the region, Myanmar, is starting to move toward this precise understanding as it strengthens ties with the outside, and now thoroughly neoliberalized, world. Where elites have accepted this strategy, the tensions of neoliberal reform may be minimal and, in point of fact, even beneficial among the upper classes. Elsewhere I have argued that this is precisely the case in post-transitional Cambodia, where neoliberalization has become a useful part of the existing order (Springer 2010). While the potential for a small elite to consolidate their privilege is clearly not ideal for democracy, this has hardly been a stumbling block. In contrast to the experience of the upper class, though, neoliberal reform for the lower classes is much more problematic as any potential benefits are not as forthcoming. Inequality and poverty remain widespread in much of Southeast Asia, and the neoliberal fantasy of the ‘trickle-down effect’ has undoubtedly failed to bear fruit for the poor, particularly for those in rural areas. Consequently, neoliberalism in Southeast Asia may have actually played a key role in consolidating authoritarianism even more as those left behind in the wave of policy reforms so frequently come into conflict with those reaping neoliberalism’s rewards (Canterbury 2005). Where and when those changes have been particularly rapid and a legitimizing discourse for neoliberalism has not already become widely circulated, the potential for conflict is even more pronounced. This is precisely why penetration of neoliberal ideas at an everyday level becomes a determinant of the degree of authoritarianism needed under neoliberalization (Springer 2015). Furthermore, Southeast Asia has been staged as a theater in the ongoing ‘war on terror,’ meaning that support for authoritarian regimes by the United States has been reinvigorated. This war of perpetuity has brought with it a revived nexus between police and military power, which has been exploited in the region. Preventive arrest and detention in concert with extensive powers of surveillance have generated panoptic conditions in many Southeast Asian states (Tyner 2006).

**Conclusion**

Across the region the general mood might be summed up by what is occurring in the Indonesian context where investor perspectives on the country are informed by an underlying sense of nostalgia for ‘the good old days’ of Soeharto when things were certain. In other words, investors are not primarily concerned with whether democracy is functioning or not, or even whether there is corruption or not. Instead, they simply require “a strong government, democratic or authoritarian, that provides predictability and keeps in check coalitions that might contest the terms under which they operate” (Robison 2002, 109). The global neoliberal marketplace is not necessarily hostile toward authoritarianism or supportive of democracy, but instead actually benefits from the presence of a strong state (Kinnvall 2002), which is precisely why neoliberalism can make such a good bedfellow for the ‘developmental state’. Yet insofar as the ‘strong state’ thesis is concerned (Midgal 1988), neoliberalism requires precisely the opposite conditions to function, and not because of a mistaken belief that neoliberalization sees the state wither in the face of increased market power (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Peck 2010). Contra the common misconception that authoritarian regimes constitute ‘strong states,’ we should actually conceive of them as ‘weak states’ in the sense that they are unable to secure legitimacy among the population, requiring authoritarian regimes that resort to repressive measures (Jomo 2003). The lack of consultation with the general population over economic reforms and political decisions, coupled with
reduced access to social provisions for the poor – who still continue to constitute an overwhelming majority in most Southeast Asian states – means that accountability is all but absent under neoliberalism. With little recourse for citizens and a system that is responsible only to shareholders, authoritarianism becomes the primary disposition of the Southeast Asian neoliberal state. In short, the desires of the capitalist class coincide with and come to dominate neoliberal policy orientations, making ‘particularistic demands’ the insignia of the neoliberalized state, which goes some way to explaining why it has had such a meteoric ascendency across Southeast Asia.

Neoliberalism as a conceptual category requires an appreciation for the complexity of exchanges between local, national, and regional forces operating within the global political economy. It is crucial to recognize and account for the traction of neoliberalization on its travels around the globe and to attend to how neoliberalism is always necessarily co-constituted with existing economic frameworks and political circumstances. Similarly, it is important to acknowledge that an inordinate focus on either external or internal phenomena to the exclusion of relational connections across space is insufficient in addressing the necessary features and significant articulations of neoliberalism as a series of ‘glocal’ processes. The abstraction of neoliberalism as a ‘global’ project, or even as something we can analyze at a regional level as I have attempted to do here, is necessarily contingent. In theorizing neoliberalization as an articulated, traveling, and hybridized phenomenon, my argument is not intended as plenary, and to be clear I am not suggesting that the substantive effects of neoliberalism are everywhere and always the same. Instead, I have attempted to draw out some of the articulations that neoliberalism has in the Southeast Asian context. As Southeast Asian states have become neoliberalized in their developmental agendas, planning agencies, decision-making powers and economic orientations, so too have they become increasingly integrated into transnational circuits of capital and expertise (Sneddon 2007). Patron politics, of course, predate the region’s encounter with neoliberal ideas, but it is clear that such relations have since become inextricably bound-up in processes of neoliberalization. While Southeast Asia’s particular versions of neoliberalism suggest that unique geohistorical power relations are at play, determining the precise and country-specific implications of neoliberalism requires a much more fine-grained analysis than I am able to offer here. I have only been able to speak to the broad regional patterns in neoliberalism’s uptake, where the relationship between neoliberalism, patronage, and authoritarianism across Southeast Asia is rooted in similar cultural histories and political legacies. Importantly though, the degree to which a regional approach is meaningful is necessarily contradicted by neoliberalism’s variegated stripes, as it is always context specific, protean, and checkered with contingencies and contradictions.

Note

1 This is a phrase employed by the World Bank, which initially touted the Four Asian Tigers of Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan as models for development in the region.

References


