Introduction: Changing forms of state power in Southeast Asia

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Any original book, but especially an edited collection, takes time to put together, and this one has been no exception. The editors originally felt that the time was right to update Southeast Asia in the 1980s, edited by Robison, Hewison and Higgott (1987). However, it was soon decided that a new collection would be more useful, with a focus on the political aspects of the Southeast Asian political economy. The reasons for this choice were many, but two stand out. First, the pace of social, economic and political change has been rapid, almost breakneck in some countries in recent years, so a new assessment was considered necessary. Most significant, however, was the second reason, the substantial progress being made by forces identified as ‘democratic’, not only in Southeast Asia, but in Eastern Europe and Latin America.

Certainly more representative institutions seemed to be emerging in many parts of Southeast Asia: in the Philippines, Marcos was gone, and vigorous (some would say vociferous) debate characterised politics there; Thailand was moving toward a more representative political system, and 1988 saw the first elected prime minister since 1976; in Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew finally retired from the prime ministership, handing over to the second generation of leaders; there was a succession and openness debate in Indonesia; and there were impending elections in Indonesia, the Philippines and Singapore. Even the more insulated Indochinese nations were being influenced by the breakdown of Stalinism in Eastern Europe, and being forced to at least consider political change.

While many saw these changes as being positive influences, it must be recognised that challenges to authoritarianism are not always successful. This was emphatically illustrated in the crushing of China’s democracy movement and in Burma where the manic military regime refused to acknowledge the election victory of the civilian opposition. In both cases authoritarian rule was confirmed in a brutal and decisive manner. Nor does the unravelling of authoritarian regimes necessarily lead to a democratic solution; the experience of eastern Europe has clearly shown that such developments have re-awakened anti-democratic nationalist movements and neo-fascist sentiments.

The organising theme which emerged from these observations was to ask whether there was a shift taking place from authoritarianism to democratic forms in Southeast Asia. This began with a survey of the various theoretical concerns involved in the issues of authoritarianism, democracy and the nature of transitions from one to the other. Then, these themes were to be examined in the context of various Southeast Asian nation-states. Of course these theoretical issues are not new ones in political studies, but recent discussions of democracy and authoritarianism have gained much impetus from a renewed theoretical interest. As Held (1991: 876) has noted, this renewed theoretical attention has been marked by a striking convergence of perspective among theorists interested in democracy, as... non-Marxists have come to appreciate the limitations placed on democratic life...[and] Marxist work has undertaken a reappraisal of liberal representative institutions and affirmed that state activity has to be partly understood in relation to the dynamics of electoral processes, changing patterns of interest constellations, and the competitive pressures of groups...

Recent corporatist theory may also be seen as falling into this category of convergence (cf. Cawson 1986). In Southeast Asian studies, research influenced by neopluralism and corporatism, including Anck (1992) and MacIntyre (1990a,b), have suggested useful avenues for new inquiry on the relationship between business and government in Southeast Asia. However, when it comes to the question of the transition to democratic or parliamentary forms, these studies suggest that because business people play greater and more direct roles in the political sphere, democratic reform is more likely. Unfortunately this is a crudely instrumentalist position, and offers few insights into the democratisation question.

Of more significance in approaching questions related to passage from authoritarianism and the rise of democratic forms, especially in industrialising nations, has been the Transitions debate (cf. O’Donnell & Schmitter, 1986a,b; O’Donnell, Schmitter & Whitehead 1986). In Chapter 2 the editors examine some of the themes that have emerged from this recent literature, and link it to earlier debates within modernisation and dependency theory.

The often unacknowledged question lurking behind the debate is whether changing socio-economic conditions, including shifts to high levels of capital accumulation and the development of a strong
capitalist class, bring about structural tensions within authoritarian regimes which may lead to a democratic transition. A related question is whether these authoritarian structures, which have often involved hijacking of the state apparatus by its officials, are contradictory to the economic ‘free market’ and the political needs of increasingly complex social systems. In other words, the question is whether parliamentary democracy is the ‘natural’ or best political framework for the bourgeoisie and capitalism.

In Chapter 2 the editors address a number of issues which re-emerge in each of the country studies. Specifically, the editors reject the notion that authoritarian regimes are transformed through voluntarist processes of compromise and negotiation and the increasing institutionalisation of political rights, or that success or failure in the democratisation process is a factor of strategies, tactics, leadership qualities or even accidents and coincidences (cf. O’Donnell & Schmitter 1986b). Such an approach is a rejection of any general theory of social or economic determination of political outcomes, replacing it with an approach that is more behaviouralist. We do not reject real and consequential factors such as accidents, leaders and the ‘Machiavellian’ dimensions of political action, and we can agree that social structural factors are not, of themselves, sufficient to explain or predict the nature of political transitions. However, we strongly argue that social structural factors establish the environment in which politics operates, and establishes sets of constraints and pressures that shape political outcomes.

At the same time the editors reject normative positions on capital—state relations which, for example, might imply that the emergence of business as a powerful interest group is to be expected. Rather, it is suggested that there is no clear historical highway, but a network of paths, some of them cul-de-sacs, which classes, regimes and governments must navigate.

In attempting to bring some clarity to a confusing discussion, the authors of each of the chapters have endeavoured to distinguish between the concepts of state, regime and government. While each author has tended to modify their usage, some useful distinctions may be drawn here.

The state, as understood by the editors, is an amalgam of social, political, ideological and economic elements organised in a particular manner. In this sense the state is not so much a set of functions or a group of actors, as an expression of power. This accords with Jessop’s (1983: 273) understanding, when he argues that ‘the state is not a real subject that exercises power, [but that] state power certainly exists. . .’ and is central to political struggle. He goes on to argue that state power is a set of complex social relationships that are dynamic, but at all times shaping the use of the state apparatus. By state apparatus we mean the real, existing institutional forms of state power, namely the coercive, judicial and bureaucratic arms of the state. Because these forms exist within a context of social relations, it is misleading to view the state or its apparatus as neutral.

The state and its apparatus can be differentiated from the regime, which can be said to be a particular type of organisation of the state apparatus which may take a variety of forms: liberal democracy, democratic corporatism, oligarchic democracy or dictatorship, fascism, authoritarian corporatism, totalitarianism of various types and so on. Government is regarded here as being the legislative and executive branches of the state apparatus and those officials, parties or individuals who control them.

In the sense of these definitions, it can be seen that governments may rise and fall, as in the cases of Italy and Thailand, while the state and regime remain relatively stable. It may also be, as Petras (1989: 27) proposes, that in order to maintain the state and the social order, a regime must be changed. The acquiescence of the Chilean bourgeoisie in the takeover of Pinochet may be seen as an example of this, as may democratisation in South Korea under Roh Tae Woo.

It is important to note, however, that neither the state nor its apparatus are the only centres of power within society. Clearly and unambiguously, class relations involve a broad exercise of political and social power, with the state being one of the major arenas for this.

Another important question is what is meant by democracy. It is argued by some (Keyfetz 1988) that democracy is a culturally relative term and indeed there is no regime that does not in some way describe itself as democratic. However, to accept this cultural relativist position is to deny any universal meaning to the word and, in the process, to indemnify the most scurrilous of dictatorships and to undermine the legitimacy of democratic and reformist oppositions. Another problem with the concept is that the formal structures of democracy—parties, parliaments and elections—may guarantee nothing. Even the most repressive of regimes have these. As Petras (1989) notes, peasants and workers may suffer more under civilian parliamentary regimes than under some authoritarian regimes.

In this way, Hewison (1992) has recently argued that Thailand’s rapid industrialisation does not imply that bourgeois parliamentary forms will necessarily emerge and, if they do, that they will be a boon for all. Indeed, some of the signs for the future are not encouraging. Take, for example, the odd alliances between business people, gangsters and state officials (cf. Far Eastern Economic Review 18 April 1991). Money has become central to electoral politics and the pattern of seeking financial support from business
has meant that so-called ‘influential persons’ (gangsters) have been politically legitimised. Thus, the capitalist and middle classes may not institute parliamentary forms that are necessarily more representative for the majority.

To avoid these problems we choose to regard democracy in terms of certain objectives and guarantees. First, legal guarantees of ‘citizens’ to participate in the formulation of policies. Second, the institutionalisation of specific political freedoms including freedom of speech, association and judicial rights, as well as representative control over the executive and the bureaucracy. Third, political contestation is considered legitimate and is legally supported. Finally, political democracy is also seen to encompass popular accountability. From our point of view, democracy is not, as in the pluralist model, a case of the triumph of ‘civil society’ over the state, or a situation where a neutral state aggregates and adjudicates the demands of competing interest groups in a society where all may compete on an equal footing. Rather, it is a political accommodation, but one that nevertheless reflects and essentially underpins the prevailing hierarchies of power embodied in the social order.

It should also be pointed out that we do not propose that the bourgeoisie, the ‘middle class’ and democracy go together naturally in all historical situations. Political revolutions that turn out to favour the interests of these classes have not always involved them as the primary agents of transition (Hobsbawm 1990; Moers 1991; Callinicos 1989). Miliband (1989: 32–3) argues that in many of Europe’s capitalist societies the bourgeoisie had to fight for political power, first against entrenched aristocracies, and then against organised labour. This has led to a partnership between state power and corporate power, meaning that the capitalist class is not, by nature, a force for broad participatory democracy, suggesting that many regime types and state forms may emerge in capitalist societies.

In the case of state-dominated societies, like many of those of Southeast Asia, significant elements of the capitalist and ‘middle’ classes actively support authoritarian regimes because their social position, their access to resources and their protection from other social forces require the coercive power of the state. Democracy, we suggest, requires a degree of social and ideological hegemony on the part of dominant social forces that makes redundant coercive state power in its most naked form. Hence, what may be suggested is that parliamentary systems provide the greatest flexibility for capitalists.

Of course, in the chapters that follow, not all authors agree with every point the editors make here and in Chapter 2, and there is a degree of healthy heterogeneity in theoretical approach. Not only this, but the political situation of each of the countries is dynamic and anything but homogeneous. Thus, in completing their chapters, the contributors have faced many frustrations. Not only has the assortment of political and economic situations posed a variety of difficult issues and produced diversities in response to the questions posed by the editors, but political change has been rapid since the authors began their chapters. For example, there have been elections in Thailand (and a coup and dramatic street demonstrations), Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore. Still, each author has managed to address the important theoretical questions concerning democracy and authoritarianism for their country study.

In Chapter 3, Richard Robison examines the tensions that have emerged in Indonesia as the state confronts the difficulties of maintaining its dirigiste and authoritarian structures in the face of international market forces and the coming presidential succession. Singapore’s authoritarianism in the context of parliamentary forms is the subject of Garry Rodan’s Chapter 4. Quite another situation is presented in Chapter 5, where Geoffrey Gunn examines the world’s richest nations with one of the last absolute monarchies, Brunei. Chapter 6, where Harold Crouch examines Malaysia, suggests that significant economic growth can have a rather ambiguous outcome, creating some pressures for democratisation and others for authoritarianism. Thailand’s rocky road toward more democratic forms is the subject of Chapter 7, where Kevin Hewison uses the 1991 coup as a focus for discussing the emergence of political forces opposed to military authoritarianism. The problems of transition from authoritarian forms under Marcos to a parliamentary system in the Philippines is the subject of Jane Hutchison’s Chapter 8. Finally, Vietnam’s passage away from ‘bureaucratic centralism’, representing a marked political contrast, is discussed by Melanie Beresford in Chapter 9.

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Political power in industrialising capitalist societies: Theoretical approaches

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Following World War II decolonisation in Asia saw initial enthusiasm for Western parliamentary forms. The Philippines, newly independent, engaged in a vigorous electoral process, while in Thailand elections were again in the offing after years of military rule. While decolonisation was proving more difficult in Indochina, Malaya, Indonesia and Singapore, there were widely held hopes that 'democrats' would emerge within the independence movements.

Political theory at this time also suggested considerable scope for democracy in Asia and the rest of the developing world (e.g. Geertz 1963). It was not long before this enthusiasm for democratic forms was shaken, however. In Thailand the military returned to power; in Burma a one-party state was established; Communists were making gains in Indochina and on the Malay peninsula; and Indonesia was involved in a bloody war of independence. Indeed, the situation in much of the emerging post-colonial world seemed quite chaotic, and democratic government did not appear to hold a solution. Indeed, authoritarianism soon emerged as a common political arrangement.

These shifts caused some significant reassessments of theories positing a basic contradiction between political authoritarianism and the forward march of societies towards modernity. Conservative theorists like Huntington (1968) and pluralists like Ruggs (1966), both greatly influenced by structural functionalism, argued that authoritarianism may be a necessary or inevitable stage on the road to modernity.

Later, and from a quite different theoretical perspective, radical dependency theorists, drawing on the Monopoly Capital school of American Marxism, also rejected any link between democracy and development in developing countries. In fact, they suggested that capitalism brought underdevelopment to the periphery, while the metropoles demanded strong authoritarian governments in order to