

Democratic Crossroads and Political Transitions in Southeast Asia: Domestic and International Factors

Kai Ostwald, Assistant Professor
University of British Columbia

Southeast Asia's experience with democratization is complex and rich in contradictions. On the one hand, democracy has a deeply seated history in the region, with roots that stretch back into the 19th century in the Philippines and early 20th century in Thailand. Malaysia and Singapore have consistently held elections for well over a half-century, while Indonesia successfully transitioned from autocracy to democracy nearly 20 years ago. Myanmar is currently in the midst of a similarly monumental transformation. In fact, every country in the region with the exception of Brunei uses some form of elections with more candidates than seats to fill political positions. Yet the quality of the region's elections is often characterized as deeply flawed.¹⁵ The *Electoral Integrity Project*,¹⁶ which assesses electoral quality on criteria like electoral procedures, voter enfranchisement, media neutrality, and neutrality of electoral authorities, ranks Southeast Asia last among the world's regions, including conflict-stricken regions like Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.¹⁷ Ultimately, there is little indication of a general trend towards liberal democracy among its diverse countries. This significantly limits the utility of a one-sized-fits-all policy of promoting liberal democracy as a solution to the region's challenges, and instead calls for a distinct, nuanced, and pragmatic approach towards each country that focuses on realistic and targeted interventions.

Domestic factors

Most countries in Southeast Asia are best categorized as neither fully autocratic nor fully democratic. It was often held during the 1990s that these kinds of hybrid regimes were intrinsically unstable, and that both domestic and international forces would push the "halfway houses" into an equilibrium state that resembled North American and European liberal democracies. This belief has not borne out in the region, where it is increasingly clear that the equilibrium state consists of myriad regime types, including single-party, hybrid, and competitive but flawed multi-party regimes.¹⁸ There is little evidence,¹⁹ in other words, of the anticipated general movement towards models of multi-party electoral democracy built on the principles of constitutional liberalism; nor is there significant evidence that such a model is even widely held as a goal.

¹⁵ Max Grömping, "Southeast Asian elections worst in the world," *New Mandala*, 19 February 2015. <http://www.newmandala.org/southeast-asian-elections-worst-in-the-world/>. Accessed 10 August 2017.

¹⁶ The Electoral Integrity Project, <http://www.electoralintegrityproject.com/>.

¹⁷ See for example: Max Grömping, "Southeast Asian elections worst in the world."

¹⁸ I intentionally make no normative claims about regime types. "Flawed" in this context is a reference to procedural matters, not to outcomes. The last few years have made clear that "liberal democracies" do not guarantee ideal outcomes, nor that hybrid regimes necessarily deliver only flawed outcomes.

¹⁹ Joshua Kurlantzick, "The Year in Democracy in Southeast Asia," *The Diplomat* (11 December 2015), <http://thediplomat.com/2015/12/the-year-in-democracy-in-southeast-asia/>. Accessed 10 August 2017.

The table below provides a brief overview of the region, with Canada included as a reference point. “Regime type” is a simple typology where “Single party” denotes a system in which only one party is legally allowed to compete; “Party dominant” denotes a system where multiple parties compete, but one thoroughly dominates; “Competitive democracy” denotes a system where multiple parties compete and alternate power. Brunei is led by a Sultan and does not hold elections of any type. The Electoral Integrity Project (EIP) score comes from the *Year in Elections, 2016-17* report.²⁰ Note that the scale of Myanmar’s political transition makes it difficult to assess its current regime type. In addition, the score for Thailand reflects the last election, rather than the current political situation, in which elections have been suspended since 2014.²¹

Table 1: Regime Type and Electoral Quality

<u>Country</u>	<u>Regime Type</u>	<u>EIP Score</u>	<u>EIP Category</u>
Brunei	Absolute monarchy	N/A	N/A
Cambodia	Dominant party	32	Very low
Indonesia	Competitive democracy	57	Moderate
Laos	Single party	48	Low
Malaysia	Dominant party	35	Low
Myanmar	Competitive democracy*	54	Moderate
Philippines	Competitive democracy	52	Moderate
Singapore	Dominant party	53	Moderate
Thailand	In transition*	52	Moderate
Vietnam	Single party	34	Very low
Canada	Competitive democracy	75	Very high

Note: EIP scores from Electoral Integrity Project *Year in Elections, 2016-2017*.

General explanations of any kind are difficult in a region as diverse as Southeast Asia.²² In broad terms, nonetheless, it is possible to attribute the region’s poor electoral quality and diversity of regime types to the prevailing nature of politics within its borders. A comparison is instructive. In Canada, as well as in most other liberal democracies, politics ideally takes the form of competition between alternative policy platforms, and occurs within a generally agreed upon political and institutional framework that specifies who participates in the decision-making process and how outcomes are reached. With few exceptions, this does not describe politics in Southeast Asia. Instead, the region’s politics are often a contest over the very nature of the political framework itself, making them disputes about who has the right to participate and which general principles structure decision-making. This fundamental disagreement about the foundation of politics increases the stakes for the competing actors,

²⁰ Pipa Norris and Max Grömping, “Populist Threats to Electoral Integrity: The Year in Elections, 2016-2017,” The Electoral Integrity Project (May 2017), <https://www.electoralintegrityproject.com/the-year-in-elections-2016>. Accessed 07 August 2017.

²¹ Aim Sinpeng, “Thailand’s Bleak Future,” OpenCanada.Org (25 March 2014), <https://www.opencanada.org/features/thailands-bleak-future/>. Accessed 07 August 2017.

²² Donald Emmerson, “Region and recalcitrance: Rethinking democracy through Southeast Asia.” *The Pacific Review*, 8.2 (1995): 223-248.

who often represent social, economic, religious, or regional factions that hold incompatible visions of the ideal political order. The cases of Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Myanmar illustrate this dynamic.

Indonesia's Suharto era (1965-1998) is often characterized as authoritarian. While elections were introduced in 1998, they were dominated by a Suharto-era elite until the 2014 election of Joko Widodo (Jokowi), who represents a new and distinct regional elite, and is thus seen as a political outsider at the national level.²³ This watershed transition has sharpened political contestation. Jokowi has been under constant pressure from the Suharto-era elite, who have voiced deep concerns about Indonesia's electoral system and taken steps to alter it, in part to stem the rise of competing factions.²⁴ The recent mobilization – orchestrated largely by the old elite – of conservative Islamic groups to overthrow Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (also known as Ahok, a close ally of Jokowi and another political outsider) clearly underscores the extent to which the battle to control and reshape Indonesia's polity extends beyond the bounds of competing policy platforms.

There are parallels in the Philippines, where politics have long been dominated by a relatively small network of Manila-based elite families. The recent election of Rodrigo Duterte, who is the first to come from outside this small network, has likewise fundamentally challenged the country's existing power structure.²⁵ His radical actions, from the widely publicized “war on drugs”²⁶ to the discussion of martial law²⁷ and the suspension of local elections, can be seen as part of the struggle to unseat the country's traditional elite using all available means.

The battle for control of Malaysian politics attracts less international attention, but is no less fierce. Malaysia's politics have been dominated by the United Malay National Organization (UMNO) since the party's founding over 70 years ago. Yet the party has been under unprecedented pressure during the last two elections, in which it lost significant public support to an opposition that, at least initially, advocated a departure from the country's race-based model of politics.²⁸ As an ethnic party, UMNO's relevance depends on ethnic cleavages remaining extant in the religiously and ethnically diverse country, and so it has

²³ Kai Ostwald, Krislert Samphantharak, and Yuhki Tajima, “Indonesia's Decentralization Experiment: Motivations, Successes, and Unintended Consequences” *Journal of Southeast Asian Economies*, 32.2 (2016): 139-156.

²⁴ Marcus Mietzner, “How Jokowi won and democracy survived,” *Journal of Democracy* 25.4 (2014): 111-125.

²⁵ Barry Desker, “President Duterte: A Different Philippine Leader,” *RSIS Commentary*, no. 145 (14 June 2016).

²⁶ Mong Palatino, “Duterte's ‘War on Drugs’ in the Philippines: By the Numbers,” *The Diplomat* (9 January 2017), <http://thediplomat.com/2017/01/dutertes-war-on-drugs-in-the-philippines-by-the-numbers/>. Accessed 10 August 2017.

²⁷ Felipe Villamor, “Philippine Congress Extends Martial Law in Besieged Region,” *New York Times* (22 July 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/22/world/asia/philippines-martial-law-rodrido-duterte.html>. Accessed 10 August 2017.

²⁸ Kikue Hamayotsu, “Towards a more democratic regime and society? The politics of faith and ethnicity in a transitional multi-ethnic Malaysia,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 32.2 (2014): 61-88.

taken a strategy of mobilizing those cleavages before the next election (due by mid-2018). This high-stakes manoeuvre requires a tightrope-balancing act between insufficient mobilization on the one hand (which threatens UMNO's relevance) and too much on the other hand (which carries the risk of active ethno-religious conflict).

Myanmar's politics are no less precarious. The generally positive press extended towards the recent transition from decades of military rules betrays its highly complex and incomplete nature. The current constitution reserves significant power for the military; as such, it may be better to conceive of the present arrangement as power-sharing rather than clear civilian rule.²⁹ In short, the fundamental contestation over how the country's politics will be conducted has not yet been resolved, making it difficult to initiate the ground-level policy reforms necessary to address the myriad developmental needs. With some exceptions, the same can be said for the region's remaining countries, where political outcomes are unclear and the fundamental struggles to shape political contestations remain essentially perpetual.

External factors

Political uncertainty is a long-standing feature of the region. It has not prevented substantial and effective development, both in terms of economic growth and improvements in human wellbeing.³⁰ Though controversial, this is often attributed at least partially to the stabilizing effect of the United States-led international involvement in terms of trade promotion, catalyzing FDI inflows, and mitigating domestic instability during the post-WWII years (at least in the ASEAN-6).³¹ Given this, the clear changes in external influence currently unfolding raise important questions. The narrative describing this change is ubiquitous: the inward orientation of the Trump administration hollows out the traditional role of the United States as a guarantor of stability, including in Southeast Asia. Simultaneously, a "rising China" naturally looks towards its backyard for new economic and security partnerships, finding its ability to assert power facilitated by the vacuum left in the wake of America's departure.

The recent changes in foreign influence are undeniable. The Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia, for example, have signed massive and high profile economic deals with China during the past year.³² While less publicized and smaller in scale, there have been

²⁹ Kai Ostwald, and Paul Schuler, "Myanmar's Landmark Elections: Unresolved Questions," *ISEAS Perspective*, 8 December, 2015.

³⁰ Hal Hill, "ASEAN Economic Development: An Analytical Survey—The State of the Field," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53.3 (1994): 832-866.

³¹ The ASEAN 6 refers to the first 6 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations: Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, who all implemented some form of market-based economy.

³² David Roman, "China Finds New Fans in Southeast Asia as U.S. Turn Inward," *Bloomberg* (12 December 2016), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-12-11/china-finds-new-fans-in-south-east-asia-as-u-s-turns-inward>. Accessed 10 August 2017.

several unprecedented bilateral military exercises with China, especially by Malaysia³³ and Thailand³⁴. But it is important to be nuanced in interpreting these developments, as suggestions that they amount to a rapid replacement in the region's hegemon are almost certainly incorrect. A more realistic assessment is that the United States will continue to play an important role in the region – even if in somewhat diminished capacity – simultaneous to China's growing presence.³⁵ This creates a complex web of influence (which also includes partners like Japan, Australia, Canada, and the EU) that has significant implications for domestic politics and the democratization process in the region.

The addition of an alternative major partner like China is welcomed by some of the region's governments, even if it reduces predictability.³⁶ The incredible scale of China's recent investments across Southeast Asia is only part of the reason.³⁷ Another part involves the conditions for partnership. In the case of the United States (or its traditional allies), they are generally well understood: they begin with market access, but also include demands for concessions – even if sometimes ostensible – in areas like human rights and democratic reforms. It is clear that partnership with China is not unconditional, though the precise terms of the conditions are not yet well understood and are likely still evolving. The terms of partnership do not, in any case, include democratization in any meaningful form. This creates opportunities for the region's governments to strategically collaborate with China in ways that tilt the balance of domestic battles. In Malaysia, for example, the economic deals with China have taken attention away (as well as directly alleviated) the financial scandal around Prime Minister Najib, mitigating that liability significantly and staving off pressure from the opposition. In the Philippines, new economic deals with China give Duterte leverage in the power struggle against the traditional, Manila-based elite, which maintain extensive ties with the United States. In Thailand, the partnership fills some of the void left by the partial contraction of Washington's engagement following the coup and suspension of elections. In short, the growing presence of China has widespread implications for the region's domestic political disputes. These will need to be monitored as the balance between US, Chinese, and other influence in the region evolves, and as the conditions for partnership with China stabilize.

³³ Prashanth Parameswaran, "Why Are China's Submarines Visiting Malaysia?" *The Diplomat* (4 January 2017), <http://thediplomat.com/2017/01/why-are-china-submarines-visiting-malaysia/>. Accessed 10 August 2017.

³⁴ Marwaan Macan-Markar, "Thailand and China: Brothers in arms," *Nikkei Asian Review* (2 February 2017), <http://asia.nikkei.com/magazine/20170202/Politics-Economy/Thailand-and-China-Brothers-in-arms>. Accessed 10 August 2017.

³⁵ Leo Suryadinata, and Siwage Dharma Negara, "US Vice-President Mike Pence's Visit to Indonesia: A US 'Return' to Southeast Asia?" *ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute Perspective* (19 May 2017), https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2017_32.pdf.

³⁶ Gatra Priyandita and Trissia Wijaya, "China's Southeast Asia Gambit," *The Diplomat* (31 January 2017), <http://thediplomat.com/2017/05/chinas-southeast-asia-gambit/>. Accessed 06 August 2017.

³⁷ David Roman, "China is Transforming Southeast Asia Faster Than Ever," *Bloomberg* (6 December 2016), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-12-05/china-transforms-frontier-neighbors-with-cash-for-rails-to-power>. Accessed 10 August 2017.

Implications for Canada

Both the domestic and international developments discussed have consequences for Canada's engagement with Southeast Asia. First, the region's diversity of political systems and their uncertain trajectories make it nearly impossible to sustain an effective one-size-fits-all policy towards all countries (though this does not preclude a distinct, unified policy towards ASEAN). Rather, engagement will be more meaningful when it reflects the nuanced political environments of each country and is informed by a high degree of country-specific expertise. As politics in Southeast Asia are often very personalized (and frequently operate through informal networks), extensive on-the-ground engagement and credible commitments towards a sustained presence are necessary to be an influential partner in the region's development. In this sense, the expansion of Canada's diplomatic presence following the recent opening of an Embassy in Myanmar and two diplomatic offices (in Cambodia and Laos) is a positive development, even if Canada's footprint in Asia remains thin relative to other regions. This should be complimented with efforts to develop further country-specific expertise within Global Affairs Canada (GAC). Only with sufficient in-house expertise and engagement with expertise beyond the government can GAC effectively respond to the complex and fluid conditions in the region's countries.

The absence of evidence for a general progression towards democracy, or at least towards forms beyond minimal electoral democracy, should also inform Canada's policies in the region. With no real prospects for widespread democratization in the coming decade, there is little foreseeable payoff for an ideologically driven promotion of liberal democracy as a comprehensive solution to the region's problems, especially if the United States reduces its symbolic and practical efforts towards that end. Rather, targeted interventions that focus on areas like governance, education, gender equality, public health, environmental sustainability, or technical capacity will be better received and have a greater chance of making a meaningful impact. Aside from improving living conditions in the region, those efforts also make incremental contributions towards more stable and better functioning political environments. This targeted approach does not, of course, preclude continued pressure in areas like human rights, which Canada and other countries must maintain.

The rapidly evolving roles of great powers in the region present new opportunities for a middle power like Canada, whose perceived neutrality and high levels of technical capacity make it a welcomed partner. From Canada's perspective, the long-term opportunities of engaging with Southeast Asia are clear: Canada's need to diversify its partnerships, together with Southeast Asia's demographics profile and growth trajectory, create significant potential for mutual benefit over the coming decades. Realizing that requires Canada to demonstrate a credible commitment to the region now, as well as to contribute to the region's needs in a pragmatic manner.