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Chapter 1

The Continuing Evolution of Southeast Asia

Alice D. Ba and Mark Beeson

This is the third edition of Contemporary Southeast Asia. In the intervening period since the second edition was published in 2008, much has happened – though there is also much that seems strikingly familiar. On the domestic front, democratization forces continued to contend with more authoritarian inclinations. In Thailand, a military junta suspended Thailand’s democratic institutions and constitution in 2014, putting its critics on alert. But while the act raised questions about Southeast Asian democratization, it also seemed all too familiar in the context of Thai politics and its history of military coups. In Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) not only won in a landslide electoral victory but was allowed to assume power, ending nearly a half-century of military rule; yet Myanmar’s military remains a powerful force over key agencies and a check on the NLD. Minority populations also remain systematically excluded as they have in the past, with the Rohingya Muslim population an especially vulnerable and persecuted group. Indonesia saw its second popularly elected president take office – though President Jokowi Widodo’s narrow victory also served to illustrate that old, authoritarian influences also remained alive and well.

Similarly, on the international front, developments have been dramatic even at the same time that they echo familiar themes. The South China Sea re-emerged as an issue and challenge in Southeast Asia’s relations with China, destabilizing what had been a mostly positive trajectory of post-Cold War China–Southeast Asia relations. For many, both China’s maritime push and strong stances taken against some Southeast Asian claimants served as a reminder of the challenges of Chinese power, feeding nationalist forces in Vietnam and the Philippines, as well as Japan, where Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was able to loosen the constitutional constraints on Japanese foreign policy. South China Sea tensions also renewed old fears about the spectre of major power conflict – this time, between the United States
and China. The largely unanticipated election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States also injects additional uncertainty into both US–China relations and US policies towards Southeast Asia. At the very least, recent developments appear to challenge many of the most firmly established assumptions about the conduct and trajectory of international relations in the Asia-Pacific generally and in Southeast Asia especially.

Yet, as in domestic politics, there are also some remarkable consistencies. In particular, a mix of bilateral and multilateral approaches, as well as great power-inclusive institutions, remains an important feature of the region’s international relations. On the one hand, the expansion of strategic and economic ties with the United States affirms the importance of the United States, especially as a strategic partner in Southeast Asia; on the other, states also continue to expand their relations with a variety of other states, including China. Meanwhile, continuities can also be found in the tensions that have long defined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the region’s premier organization, which celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2017. Adopting its most extensive and multifaceted integration agenda to date, ASEAN remains, at once, an important focal point of the region’s collective strategic and economic response to new challenges and a point of ongoing negotiation and tension between states interested in protecting sovereign prerogatives.

Such developments serve to illustrate Southeast Asia’s mix of change and continuity. Partly, such contrary developments are a function of the fact that change tends to be bounded by established practices, thinking and relationships. Partly also, this mix reflects the geopolitical and historical contexts that Southeast Asia has been embedded. To make sense of these developments, this third edition of *Contemporary Southeast Asia* has gathered a new set of authors who engage with the region’s politics and challenges from different angles and perspectives. This introductory chapter serves the purpose of setting up their discussions with a brief introduction to Southeast Asia. It also outlines the general approach taken by this volume, as well as some preoccupying themes in the study of this diverse and remarkable region.

**A Southeast Asian snapshot**

There are a number of ways of thinking about and differentiating between the countries of Southeast Asia. One of the most important and common broad-brush distinctions is dictated by sheer geography – namely, the ways that geography has contributed to distinctive developmental and strategic contrasts between the archipelagic nations of maritime Southeast Asia and those of mainland Southeast Asia (see Tarling 1998). The fertile river systems of what we now think of as modern Thailand, Vietnam and Myanmar, for example, provided the basis for population growth and shaped the
The Continuing Evolution of Southeast Asia

... contours of political power and organization long before the colonial era. By contrast, economic and political development in the maritime regions of what are now Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines was always made more difficult by their archipelagic environments defined by water and geographic division.

Although the physical barriers of sea and mountain that are so characteristic of much of Southeast Asia are not the formidable obstacles they once were, the basic distinction between mainland and maritime Southeast Asia remains relevant to understanding the political and geostrategic differences between states. Moreover, the fact that ASEAN’s original membership was overwhelmingly of maritime states (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines), with only one mainland Southeast Asian state (Thailand), also serves as an additional reminder that the political-institutional expressions of Southeast Asia may also not always match the region in practice or in ideal. Only recently has ASEAN incorporated the majority of states in Southeast Asia – a process that will be complete if and when Timor Leste joins the grouping (see Davies in this volume).

Southeast Asia’s geography also did not stop the region from becoming enmeshed in extensive trade networks that ranged from China to India and the Persian Gulf (Reid 1999). Not only did such commercial interaction act as a spur to the development of trading centres across the region in places like Malacca, Java and Sumatra, but it also had the effect of introducing all of the world’s major religions to the region via the traders or proselytizers that followed in their wake. The importation of major religious traditions into the region has, therefore, left an enduring legacy, with Christian, Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu communities existing side by side in Malaysia and Indonesia; Buddhists, Christians and Muslims in Burma, the Philippines and Singapore; Buddhists and Muslims in Thailand; and Buddhists and Christians predominating in Vietnam. Only Brunei (Muslim) and Cambodia (Buddhist) have relatively homogeneous religious social identities. And as Eunsook Jung’s chapter in this volume highlights, even within the same religion, there can be many variants and ‘faces’ (see Jung in this volume).

In fact, one of Southeast Asia’s more distinctive and enduring sociopolitical realities has been its different, religiously demarcated social groups whose co-existence, moreover, has been, at times, a source of tension and conflict, as well as a defining challenge of many of Southeast Asia’s post-colonial states. A snapshot of the contemporary demographic make-up of Southeast Asia serves to illustrate some of the tremendous diversity that constitutes contemporary Southeast Asia (see Table 1.1). Singapore has a multi-ethnic population but its small size – about 5.6 million – and the fact that its population enjoys some of the highest living standards in the world mean that such differences have not generally been sources of major tension. In contrast, Indonesia has the dubious distinction of having a very large population (over 250 million), combined with fairly low per capita
<table>
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<th>Form of Govt.</th>
<th>Main Religion</th>
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<td>Brunei</td>
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<td>Cambodia</td>
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<td>7,241</td>
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<td>Singapore</td>
<td>5,535,000</td>
<td>Parliamentary Republic</td>
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<td>52,744</td>
<td>85,021</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>26</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>68,979,000</td>
<td>Constitutional Monarchy/ Military junta</td>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>5,737</td>
<td>16,064</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>37</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Communist State</td>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>2,109</td>
<td>6,083</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>39</td>
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</table>

Source: World Bank Development Indicators & ASEAN Secretariat & CIA (US)
incomes. Indeed, only Singapore and Brunei enjoy developed country living standards, with Malaysia and Thailand occupying an intermediate rung, and the rest of the region enjoying much lower annual incomes. For essentially poor countries with large populations like Vietnam and the Philippines, the development challenge for national governments is immense, making the prospects for regional stability and development less certain as a consequence.

But while there are vast differences in income and population size, one social development is becoming more common, namely, a shift from the country to the city. Characterized as one of the great historical transformations that has characterized human societies everywhere in the modern period, this urban migration introduces new and additional tensions. Southeast Asia is no exception in this regard, although Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and – more surprisingly, perhaps – Thailand all have populations in which more than half of the population is non-urban (Ooi 2007). This overall trend towards urbanization is important because not all of the new arrivals in Southeast Asia’s rapidly expanding cities are able to realize their ambitions; the numbers living in slum conditions remains high in some of the region’s poorer countries. Meanwhile, the phenomenon of transnational migration from a variety of sources introduces yet more populations to the mix (Rother, this volume). This would be a challenge in itself without the additional pressure that flows from still rising population levels and greater demands for energy (Simpson 2007; and this volume). Even without their obvious environmental impact, the cumulative pressures and problems that flow from unfulfilled expectations and growing food insecurity raise questions about political stability and the maintenance of order.

The remarkable range of political forms and political organization found in Southeast Asia is another major distinguishing characteristic of the region as a whole and between the countries that constitute it. Even authoritarianism in Southeast Asia displays notable variance and diversity (see Arugay and Sinpeng, this volume). Although Southeast Asia has predominantly been associated with authoritarian rule in the post-colonial period, democratization and liberalization are also processes in evidence, even if in some areas more than others. Indonesia and even Myanmar have made important moves towards more democratic forms of government, and the Philippines has a quite vibrant civil society. The recent election of Rodrigo Duterte as president, suggests, however, civil liberties are far from guaranteed. Most disappointingly, perhaps, the failure of democratic government and the re-imposition of military rule in Thailand is a reminder that political progress is far from certain. Similarly, Vietnam has made significant moves to embrace the market and attract foreign investment, but communist leadership – for now, at least – appears entrenched there, as in Laos.

As the above suggests, political developments point to a mix of trends. Indeed, it may be more accurate to say that Southeast Asian states, despite
their differences, seem to share a curious mix of authoritarian and democratic elements that can exist side by side. Thus Brunei and Cambodia display variations on the theme of constitutional monarchy. Singapore and Malaysia have spawned their own distinctive forms of democracy typified by regular elections and the trappings of formal democracy but also the absence of regime change (Case 2002). Malaysian politics are currently also an especially dramatic reminder of the continuing problems the region has with corruption and the rule of law (Dick 2012; Wright 2016).

These distinctive modes of political organization are significant enough in their own right, but historically entrenched ethnic and social relations add a further layer of complexity, as Chapter 3 by Claire Sutherland demonstrates. The multiracial society that is so characteristic of Malaysia, for example, is a direct consequence of the colonial experience and the flows of migrants that were associated with British imperialism and the needs of a colonial economy. Moreover, as Alan Chong highlights in his chapter, the logic of ‘divide and rule’ that typified many colonial policies also contributed to the racially informed and racially charged nationalist policies pursued not just by Malaysia, but also by Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam and Indonesia. Today, the governments and sources of migration may be different, but flows of labour in service of economic development remain a significant part of the Southeast Asian developmental experience, as well as the subject of new ethnic tensions and insecurities (see Sutherland and Rother, this volume).

Such flows illustrate how the local and the regional can be mutually constitutive parts of multidimensional cross-border processes in which questions of politics, economics and security can become intermingled (Beeson 2014). In many parts of Southeast Asia migrants from China in particular have played a prominent part in the region’s overall economic development, though they have often occupied a tenuous political place. During the Cold War, most notably, ethnic Chinese were seen by some as a potential fifth column, or agents of Chinese communist influence. Such suspicions, as recent developments show, have not completely dissipated. In contemporary times when China is associated more with economic opportunity than communism, Southeast Asia’s ethnic Chinese populations continue to play important roles in facilitating economic linkages. Some analyses have also given attention to distinct, Chinese-style business practices and relationships (Yeung 2000) that provide the basis for a so-called ‘Bamboo network’ constituted by a Chinese business community that transcends national borders and which can use ‘guanxi’ or personal connections to grease the wheels of international commerce (Weidenbaum and Hughes 1996).

Such characterizations, however, can also be easily exaggerated. They can also have political implications for Southeast Asia’s ethnic Chinese populations. For example, many Chinese migrants have enjoyed great economic success in their respective countries, but that success can also easily become a source of ethnic resentment. The figures are remarkable and
revealing. In Indonesia, ethnic Chinese make up only 3.5 per cent of the population, yet control 73 per cent of equity in the national stock market. In Malaysia the ratio is 29 per cent of the population to 61 per cent equity, in the Philippines 2 per cent population control 50 per cent of the equity, and in Thailand the 10 per cent of the population that has ethnic Chinese ancestry controls 81 per cent of domestic equity (Studwell 2007, 200).

Such figures form a significant part of the complex economic and political relations that exist between ethnic Chinese and other populations. First, racial tensions are part of both the historical and contemporary reality of Southeast Asia. Malaysian economic and social policies – indeed, much of its political development since independence – have been a direct product of the inter-communal violence that erupted between indigenous Malays and ethnic Chinese in 1969 (Crouch 1996). The subsequent positive discrimination enjoyed by the indigenous *bumiputera* population was a direct consequence of attempts to address underlying sources of tension and resentment. Similarly, of the many problems the Asian financial crisis created for Indonesia, one of the most troubling was the violence perpetrated against an ethnic Chinese community which was seen as occupying a privileged position relative to the indigenous population. The fact that those who bore the brunt of that resentment were the predominantly small-scale Chinese business people and not the well-connected business elites around the Suharto family only highlights the visceral nature of such tensions. More recently, in 2017, the mobilization of Muslim groups against Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (known as Ahok), the ethnic Chinese Christian (now former) governor of Jakarta who subsequently lost a bitterly fought election and then jailed for blasphemy has also served as another illustration of the tenuous place that ethnic Chinese and other minority groups occupy, not to mention a test of religious and ethnic tolerance and a challenge to the idea of a pluralist Indonesia.

**Unity in diversity**

The diversity that constitutes Southeast Asian politics has challenged more than domestic governance; it has also challenged inter-state relations in the post-independence era. Historically, that diversity has posed particular challenges to Southeast Asia’s intra-regional relations, with implications also for states’ global relations. In fact, no other region on earth matches Southeast Asia’s myriad political structures, ethnic and religious identities, or variations in economic outcomes. In this sense, it is quite remarkable that Southeast Asia, a term that came into general use only since the Second World War, as a geographic or political conception exists at all.

In fact, the challenge of diversity has been an especially defining challenge for both ASEAN and its member states. As the principal institutional expression of ‘Southeast Asia’ since 1967 – that is, the idea that there is such a thing as a common political enterprise among Southeast Asia’s very
different states – ASEAN’s evolution has been defined by its efforts to bridge ideological, geopolitical and developmental differences. In addition to the mainland–maritime differences and political variations noted above, states also vary in their levels of economic development, which can additionally complicate the ability of states to coordinate common positions vis-à-vis global challenges, opportunities or actors. As Greg Felker’s chapter highlights, Southeast Asia – despite the economic optimism often associated with the region – remains a region where poor, agrarian economies exist alongside some of Asia’s more successful ‘middle-income’ economies. Such differences serve as a reminder that the pursuit of national and regional unity remains very much a normative, as much a practical enterprise, that has defined both national and ASEAN–regional projects in Southeast Asia (Ba 2009).

Indeed, given the many intra-regional differences highlighted in the above discussion, there are considerable grounds for questioning whether what we think of as contemporary Southeast Asia constitutes a region at all beyond the most basic of geographic signifiers. Moreover, ASEAN’s expanded membership has added greater diversity to the organization, further challenging its capacity for more concerted action. Among the more dramatic examples has been the South China Sea disputes, which have given illustration to not just differences between China and ASEAN states but also ASEAN states themselves. In that case, some see mainland–maritime differences complicating ASEAN’s ability to develop a unified response to China’s territorial claims and activities (Emmerson 2016). Recent developments and divisions challenge states to reconsider long-standing practices, including non-interference and its consensus-based decision-making process.

Making sense of Southeast Asia

How do we make sense of the complex forces that constitute ‘Southeast Asia’? This question is made contentious and difficult not just because of the region’s heterogeneity, but also because there is a debate about the usefulness and applicability of concepts and suppositions that are drawn from ‘Western’ social science (Huotari and Rüland 2014). More generally, as Alan Chong’s chapter especially highlights, it is clear that the study of Southeast Asia has historically suffered from a form of ‘Eurocentricism’; consequently, issues that may not have been compatible with or taken seriously by dominant Western narratives and paradigms can be overlooked (see also Lewis 2002; Weiss 2008; Hobson 2012). Consequently, as more than one chapter in this volume notes, Southeast Asia often occupies an ‘ambiguous’ or non-existent place in the theoretical and disciplinary discussions. The disconnects between Southeast Asia and social science theories of economic development, democratization, the middle class, geopolitical balancing and institutional development are notable, even legendary.
A prominent preoccupation of recent scholarship on Southeast Asia has consequently been its self-conscious efforts to account for the distinctive features of regional history and development that may have been neglected by the field’s more defining disciplinary approaches and theories. This preoccupation with bridging the divide between what has traditionally been considered ‘area studies’ and ‘theory’ – that is, an identified need to ‘improve and invigorate the scholarly synergy between region and discipline’ (Kuhonta et al. 2008: 2) – may also be more evident in this edition of Contemporary Southeast Asia than in editions past. This is no easy challenge and one we make no attempt to resolve here. What we can do, however, is to give a flavour of the debate around Southeast Asia and try to explain what is at stake and why discussions can be so polarized and even rancorous at times.

Debates about comparative politics and international relations in Southeast Asia are different but they also share some common preoccupations. They share, for example, concerns about the state, regime priorities, the implications of economic development for politics, and also the interplay between global forces and pressures, on the one hand, and local institutions and practices, on the other. For scholars of Southeast Asian politics, the question is how to generate theories and conceptualizations that are both true to the region and, at the same time, able to engage with and even challenge existing disciplinary approaches. The extent to which actors and policies are driven by ‘objective’ rival situational interests unmitigated by local beliefs, identities or cultures has consequently become an important part of theoretical debates about Southeast Asian politics and relations.

In comparative politics, such instrumentalist approaches that emphasize the situational interests of actors in driving politics and institutions, for example, now contend with other approaches that differ in their starting assumptions. They contrast especially with primordialist arguments that trace political drivers to more essentialist claims about identity and religion. Both primordialist and instrumentalist arguments also contrast with constructivists who see the identities and interests of actors as socially constructed.

International relations debates exhibit some similar fault lines. In the case of Southeast Asia, an especially well-known division has been between realists who emphasize ‘structural’, material forces, and constructivists who focus on the influence of ideas, norms and the social construction of reality. While ‘realism’ and ‘constructivism’ are not the only positions in international relations scholarship, they have become especially influential in the study of – and even the teaching about (Chong and Hamilton-Hart 2009) – Southeast Asia as these approaches highlight very different forces at work in shaping and/or constraining regional development and relations in Southeast Asia.

Realist and constructivist differences have been especially influential in shaping debates and understandings of regional cooperation and especially
ASEAN, as well as Southeast Asian states’ engagement with larger powers. Matt Davies’ chapter on ASEAN offers a good introduction to some of the more defining differences that divide scholars of ASEAN. Realists, who emphasize the struggle for survival in a system where the pursuit of material power and self-reliance are pivotal, have a notoriously pessimistic view of international relations (Booth 2011). They are consequently more sceptical about both ASEAN and the prospects for, and effectiveness of, institutionalized forms of cooperation on the parts of states which are understood to be selfish and always suspicious of their counterparts (Jones and Smith 2007). In addition, for realists, because the states of Southeast Asia are not ‘great powers’ they lack the capacity to influence other actors, even when acting collectively.

By contrast, constructivists, who consider questions of power more broadly and state interests as context-bound, have tended to be more open to the ability of even less powerful states to bridge differences and influence the behaviour of their more powerful counterparts. Among constructivists, Amitav Acharya (2009) has done more than most to highlight what he considers to be the importance of contingent norms and diplomatic practices either in mediating the influence of external ideas and initiatives, or in creating an environment in which intra-regional tensions and problems can be addressed. For all its challenges, ASEAN and its diplomatic practices have also given definition and even identity to a region long known for its diversity. Some have gone even further, attributing the so-called ‘long peace of Asia’ to the diplomatic practices and values that ASEAN has been instrumental in promoting (Kivimäki 2014), though such causal conclusions may also be mitigated by the general decline in inter-state war in much of the world (Pinker 2012). Constructivists also highlight ASEAN’s influence and leadership in shaping the institutional setting and attracting a diverse set of states to a common table in ways that no other regional actor can (Stubbs 2014).

A key point of debate between realists and some constructivists has, in fact, been the relative importance of global strategic, conventionally powerful forces, on the one hand, and local knowledge and agency, on the other. As realists highlight, powerful external forces, be they economic, political or, in this case, strategic, have played a major role in shaping the parameters of the Southeast Asian region. Yet how this Southeast Asian region would eventually be put into practice and made more politically meaningful to those that inhabit it is also very much a product of local actors, local discourses and local dispositions, and also local agency. Charrier (2001), for example, considers how ASEAN did not so much create a Southeast Asian political space, as ‘indigenize’ an existing one that had been given de facto expression by the activities of the colonial powers in particular and the later discursive enterprises of generations of area specialists more generally. In a similar but different vein, Ba (2009) considers how the recurrence of Southeast Asia’s usage in word and practice also has had the effect
of gradually bringing the region into more substantial reality, but also the
important roles played by global developments and global actors in catalys-
ing regional activity in institutions like ASEAN.

In short, there are vastly different ways of thinking about what is hap-
pening in contemporary Southeast Asia. In highlighting these contending
perspectives, our intent is not to resolve their disputes so much as to recog-
nize that different conclusions may reflect different theoretical approaches
and even normative preferences, as well as where scholars cut into a par-
ticular problem. Indeed, there is a well-known ‘selection bias’ that affects
all of us to some degree and that influences our research agendas, the con-
clusions we come to and even the countries we choose to focus on (Geddes
1990). The simple reality is that in a region that includes so many countries
and historical experiences, to say nothing of the number of different lan-
guages, it is impossible for any single scholar to be expert on Southeast Asia
as a whole.

Thus this volume draws on the expertise of varied authors, who them-
soever draw on a range of scholarship. At the same time, this volume is not
without a distinct perspective. Specifically, its position is that it makes sense
to think of Southeast Asia in regional terms. Despite the national diversity
that is the defining feature of the region, there are a number of region-wide
processes that have given Southeast Asia both a particular identity and
a set of distinguishing political, economic, social and even environmen-
tal dynamics that have in turn shaped national outcomes. Thus chapters
approach Southeast Asia at the regional level, rather than at the level of iso-
lated, national case studies, generally favoured by collections of this sort.
Our authors give important consideration to national and local forces and
pressures but they also situate these influences within regional trends and
regionally based processes and interactions. By isolating the elements of
national and regional forces and the way they interact it is thus possible to
build a more complete picture of their interaction and the forces that are
driving development in Southeast Asia at the national and regional levels.

Structure of the volume

Our volume begins with a chapter by Robert Cribb, who introduces readers
to some basic history and historical context for Southeast Asia’s politics.
That chapter is followed by Claire Sutherland’s discussion of nationalism
and ethnicity in Southeast Asia. Her chapter offers important historical
and political context for a common concern that recurs in subsequent
chapters, namely, the contestedness of states in Southeast Asia. Building
on four themes – borders, transnationalism, citizenship and sovereignty –
Sutherland highlights the ways that Southeast Asia’s contemporary states
and borders are political and social constructions. As she highlights, these
constructions may be characterized as ‘borders in the head’, but they also
have very real political and practical implications for domestic security and regime legitimacy, geopolitics and local livelihoods.

The contestedness of states also has bearing on state capacities and functions, a subject that is addressed in different ways by Scott Fritzen’s chapter on public administration, as well as Greg Felker’s chapter on the political economy of Southeast Asia. Scott Fritzen’s chapter on public administration considers the state and its capacities in terms of ‘how the machinery of government is structured, resources deployed, and authorities and accountability distributed in the state’. Specifically, his chapter gives attention to the changing capacities and reform trajectories of states by looking at the particular challenges posed by contemporary efforts to manage corruption and renegotiate centre–local relations. As he highlights, the discourses and ideas surrounding administrative reforms in the region display remarkable similarities, but just as striking are the differences in the administrative capacities and effectiveness of Southeast Asian states.

Political economy forms the basis of Greg Felker’s chapter. Southeast Asia may be distinguished by its diversity, but contemporary awareness of Southeast Asia as a distinct place on the globe has been very much linked to the impressive economic development experienced by a number of Southeast Asian states – the so-called ASEAN-4 and ASEAN-5 (Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines and Singapore). Further, Southeast Asian development offers distinct combinations of state-led and market-oriented approaches – even, a ‘Southeast Asian model of development’. As Felker illustrates, however, such economic development was not a foregone conclusion, and it would be a mistake to attribute Southeast Asia’s economic development to initial resource endowments alone. Rather, the variation in their development trajectories points to important ‘policy influences [that] ... were crucial in distinguishing the economic dynamos to the laggards’. These policies, combined with factors of history and location, have also resulted in Southeast Asia’s ‘deep integration into the global economy’ that includes East Asian ‘regionalizing dynamics’ and economic dependence that continues to inform and structure their developmental trajectories.

Aries Arugay and Aim Sinpeng’s chapter on the ‘varieties of authoritarianism and the limits of democracy in Southeast Asia’ sets up three chapters on political development and domestic regime dynamics in Southeast Asia. Their chapter begins by observing the curious mix of authoritarian and democratic practices in Southeast Asia. The curious mix is evident not just in regime variations between states but also within them. On the one hand, political trends in Southeast Asia suggest ‘stable consensus’ that democratic elections should be the mode of leadership selection, the most recent and dramatic example being the election that brought Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD to power in one of Southeast Asia’s most authoritarian regimes. On the other hand, as they highlight, any expectation that Southeast Asian states will constitute the next ‘wave’ of democratization is also countered by ‘the sheer majority of authoritarian regimes’ and persistence
of authoritarian institutions in Southeast Asia. As they note, even the best of Southeast Asia’s so-called democracies exhibit authoritarian features or inclinations that threaten to disrupt and even reverse democratization processes. Indeed, the degrees of authoritarian resilience to be found in Southeast Asia beg for explanation.

Taking a very different approach is Alan Chong’s chapter, which offers a cultural perspective on Southeast Asian politics and development. In so doing, he not only departs from those ‘who read objective causation into the competition between rival interests’, but also those who see Southeast Asian authoritarianism solely in terms of crude violence or coercive power. Defining culture as ‘the belief in immanent tradition’, Chong also counters those who interpret invocations of culture in Southeast Asia as purely instrumental and self-serving. As he puts it, ‘while both essentialist and colonially manufactured notions of culture are challengeable … it does not mean that there is not political value in justifying all manner of policies as culture inspired or culture bound’. Ultimately, cultural symbols and appeals to a cultural inheritance matter, and ‘relations of superiority and subjection can just as easily be voluntary under a particular understanding of cosmic order’ or cultural context.

Eunsook Jung’s discussion on the role and place of Islam in Southeast Asia’s contemporary politics follows. Her chapter highlights how the politics of Islam in Southeast Asia can vary significantly depending on the state. For example, even in Muslim-majority states, which have all experienced the increased prominence of Islamist parties and priorities, they can still differ in the centrality of Islam to their institutions, the popularity of Islamist parties, and the drivers behind Islamization in policymaking. In contrast, in Thailand, the Philippines and Myanmar, where Muslims share the commonality of being minorities that ‘have been discriminated against formally and informally by their governments and the majority of the population’, the politics of Islam more often takes the form of exclusive nationalism, where to quote Claire Sutherland’s chapter, ‘[t]he options here, baldly stated, are integration or deportation’ or worse.

Following Jung’s chapter are four chapters that explore the ways that Southeast Asia’s authoritarian institutions and practices both challenge and are being challenged by intersecting domestic and global forces. Matt Davies’ discussion of ASEAN highlights how regionalism in Southeast Asia has come to express a kind of authoritarian, illiberal peace that today constrains in important ways ASEAN’s ability to accommodate a more responsive approach to a range of security, economic and sociopolitical challenges. As he puts it, ‘Regionalism in Southeast Asia was, and remains, intended to cement and secure the power, legitimacy, and wealth of member states through protecting, not transcending, both nominal sovereignty and their ability to enjoy that sovereignty.’

Other chapters echo Davies’ concerns about the limits of ASEAN’s authoritarian and state-centric regionalism in responding to contemporary
challenges. Of the chapters, Adam Simpson’s discussion on the environment – the annually recurrent regional haze, deforestation, climate change, energy security and the pursuit of hydropower projects – may be the most critical of ASEAN as an organization, whose elites he characterizes as ‘inept custodians of the region’s natural resources’. As he illustrates, such environmental concerns are ‘intimately intertwined’ with not just each other, but also with the ‘social, political and economic contexts’ in which they are embedded. In that any effective response requires multidimensional and ‘holistic’ action, such connections clearly complicate effective governance of the environment with implications for daily health, local livelihoods, industries, biodiversity and physical security. Moreover, in the absence of ‘environmentally responsible policymaking and implementation’ by national governments and ASEAN, as well as by corporations, environmental justice emerges as a unifying and mobilizing theme of varied and broad-based environmental movements.

Stefan Rother’s and Helen Nesadurai’s chapters on, respectively, migrant labour and civil society similarly begin by highlighting the limitations of existing arrangements at both national and regional levels. Rother’s chapter considers one of the more exploited and vulnerable populations in Southeast Asia, namely, that of migrant labour. While host countries generally benefit from migrant labour, Rother highlights that the same may not be true for the migrants themselves. He notes the particular challenges faced by Philippine migrant workers, who find themselves vulnerable not only abroad but also on their return home. In some cases, returning migrants are victimized by the very officials that are supposed to protect them. Meanwhile, a third-party ‘migration industry’ also exploits. For such populations, the ‘triple win scenario in which both countries of origin and destination, as well as the migrants themselves benefit’ is a thesis that remains unproven in the absence of sufficient support systems, better institutions, focused resources and improved economic or political conditions in their home countries.

Helen Nesadurai’s chapter takes on the topic of civil society in Southeast Asia. As she notes, the very conception of civil society, defined as that ‘realm of voluntary self-organisation … between state, market and family’ is a contentious one given the constraints imposed by authoritarian states. All the more surprising, then, are instances such as the production of sustainable palm oil, which has seen the emergence of alternative governance arrangements. The question at the heart of her chapter is the extent to which civil society can drive transformational change via different political spaces – the first being ASEAN and the second being the realm of transnational private governance. In a conclusion similar to Simpson’s on the environment, the case of sustainable palm oil suggests that such change is indeed possible but in spaces ‘out of the shadow of the state’.

Finally, the last four chapters give attention to the security realm, especially more conventional geopolitical pressures faced by Southeast Asian states. Andrew Tan begins the discussion by highlighting how the ‘most
The fundamental source of insecurity in Southeast Asia lies in its own history, namely, the artificial construction of states in the region. That condition has produced complex and interdependent security challenges in which few issues are purely internal or external. His chapter gives particular attention to a number of issues that have recently been at the forefront of Southeast Asian security: the threat posed by radical Islamist groups, domestic insurgents, transnational terrorist networks and the South China Sea.

Following Tan’s discussion are chapters on three of Southeast Asia’s most important extra-regional relationships – namely, China, Japan and the United States. All three chapters highlight how these relationships, each in their own way, have been mutually beneficial to both the Southeast Asian and the major power sides of the equation. All three also highlight the ways that each of the relationships are mitigated by important uncertainties. Some of these questions are specific to the particular relationship. Alice Ba and Cheng-Chwee Kuik’s chapter on Southeast Asia’s relations with China highlights, for example, a distinct combination of geographic proximity, widening power asymmetries, and history make for an interesting mix of risk and reward. Contemporary and simultaneous developments like the South China Sea and China’s infrastructure initiatives in Southeast Asia make China a powerful source of both apprehension and attraction.

Hidetaka Yoshimatsu’s chapter on Southeast Asia’s relations with Japan gives attention to some similar but also different considerations. Specifically, Yoshimatsu gives emphasis to how a combination of geography, Japan’s unique post-war constraints, and US–Japan relations have made Southeast Asia a particular priority for Tokyo. Similarly, here, as in the case of China, power differentials are not inconsequential in that both Southeast Asia’s post-war economic development and regional integration have very much benefited from the material and diplomatic attention given by Tokyo and also by Japanese firms. Of the three extra-regional powers covered in this volume, Japan led the way in institutionalizing its relations with Southeast Asian states through ASEAN.

David Capie’s chapter then situates Southeast Asia’s relations with the United States in the context of US–Asia policy and US primacy in Asia. His chapter highlights the greater attention given to Southeast Asia under the US ‘rebalance’ towards Asia policies pursued by President Obama, but also remarkable continuity when it comes to US interests in Southeast Asia. Notwithstanding these efforts, however, a tighter relationship remains challenged by persistent differences over human rights, democratization and trade – and perhaps most of all, by perennial questions as to the sustainability of US commitments in Southeast Asia, questions that are now underscored and intensified by the election of Donald Trump in the United States.

But while each of these three relationships may have their distinctive challenges, they also share some common challenges. In particular, despite
the considerable interests that Southeast Asian states have to cultivate relations with each of these three powers, each relationship is also ultimately limited by what has come to be a defining predisposition of Southeast Asian states – namely, states’ preference for diversified relations and engagements. In each case, as well, fears of major power conflict also make Southeast Asian states wary of overly tight or overly exclusive relations.

Lastly, our concluding chapter offers some additional final thoughts about what developments highlighted by these chapters suggest for Southeast Asia’s future development and international relations. As even our brief snapshot above highlights, domestic and international uncertainties abound. Still, as we highlight in our concluding chapter, if history offers any guide, the ability to adapt the old and new also seems likely to remain a defining feature of the region – ensuring that Southeast Asia will remain a potent and curious mix of continuity and change, as well as a rich area for future investigation and new theoretical insight.
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