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Democratisation & new voter mobilisation in Southeast Asia: introduction

Report

Democratisation and New Forms of Voter Mobilisation in Southeast Asia

As Southeast Asia entered the twenty-first century, the procedures and practices associated with democracy had become important social facts in many parts of the region. By the 1990s, competitive elections in Thailand and in the Philippines had (re)emerged as the primary mechanism for the assumption of state office. By the turn of the century, Indonesia, the region's most populous country, had likewise experienced two peaceful transfers of presidential office, as well as the country's freest and fairest election since 1955. Meanwhile, opposition parties made strong showings in federal elections in Malaysia, seizing control over state assemblies and increasing their share of seats in the national legislature.

However, democracy has also remained intensely contested in these countries, in ways that extend beyond more familiar forms of election campaigning and voter mobilisation. The unresolved political crisis in Thailand is the most obvious case in point, prompting a return to extra-constitutional interventions by royalist military elements against an elected parliamentary government. Moreover, despite the recent build-up of pressure for change in Malaysia, its limited form of parliamentary rule remains firmly in place. While no Thai-style reversal or formal restriction of competitive elections and democratic institutions has occurred in Indonesia or the Philippines, the elected governments in Jakarta and Manila have faced charges of oligarchical rule, party cartels, corruption and electoral fraud.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, and as elsewhere, the optimism evident in much scholarship and other research focused on democratisation in the region has given way to a rather more cynical weariness vis-à-vis the political parties and electoral processes that followed transitions from authoritarian rule. Indeed, recent political trajectories across Southeast Asia challenge standard conceptions of democratisation as an essentially linear development, with democracy as the last stop at the end of the line. Instead, the complexity and variety of electoral politics in the region demand more careful attention to the dynamics of old and new forms of voter mobilisation. Thus serious electoral studies analysis requires a departure from the typical efforts at identifying political parties in Southeast Asia in terms of what they lack – 'real' ideologies, policy platforms, and memberships.

In this vein, this special report spotlights trends in shifting patterns of voter mobilisation in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand in recent years. It features extracts of papers presented at a workshop held in February 2010 at the Southeast Asia International Affairs Programme at LSE IDEAS. The workshop included participants from prominent national media and survey institutions in Southeast Asia, as well as academic researchers from the region and elsewhere. Participants were encouraged to reflect upon how political parties and politicians in the region today seek to mobilise voters in ways insufficiently captured by more commonly noted patterns of machine politics and vote-buying, patron-clientelism and cleavages. Related to broader trends and themes (e.g., reformism,

populism) also observed in the region, this LSE IDEAS workshop sought to spotlight novel mobilisational practices and electoral campaigning which have yet to attract more serious or systematic scrutiny. In as much as such practices and campaigns are part and parcel of the travails of democracy in Southeast Asia, this special report provides a first cut of papers on an otherwise comparatively overlooked perspective in the existing literature and debates on democratisation in the region.

In the first contribution to this special report, Andreas Ufen examines changing forms of voter mobilisation in Indonesia. He notes the diminishing salience of social cleavages for the mobilisation of votes since the return of competitive elections in 1999. At the same time, Ufen argues, political parties have become more personalised, characterised by generally weak platforms and loose linkages to voters. He attributes this development to a combination of factors, including the decline of ideologies, the moderation of political Islam within the party system, new media, reforms of formal institutions, and new forms of party financing connected to the altered relationship between private capital and the political class.

In a second paper on Indonesia, Syahrul Hidayat focuses closer attention on the changing strategies of one particular political party, the PKS, and its performance in the two most recent elections. Compared to 2004, the PKS was able to maintain its overall percentage of the vote in the 2009 general elections, thus making it the fourth largest party in the Indonesian parliament as well as the biggest Islamic party. As Hidayat also demonstrates, however, the party did not perform as well in urban areas in 2009 as it had previously, slipping into second or third place in the five largest cities of the country. Through this analysis of PKS, an ideological party, and changing voting patterns in urban areas, Hidayat also explores dynamics of moderation in democratic processes.

The article by Joseph Chinyong Liow turns to an examination of new forms of voter mobilisation in Malaysia. While variously described as 'soft authoritarian' or 'semi-democratic', Malaysia has in recent years seen the proliferation of civil society activism and the advent of new media politics. As noted by Liow, such developments have had a transformative effect on Malaysian politics, and the country now stands at the cusp of a two-party (or two-coalition) system. With reference to recent elections, Liow argues that a brand of alternative politics has emerged at the nexus of civil activism and new media. Whether such transformation in the forms and processes of voter mobilisation will translate into the paradigmatic change in Malaysian politics that many have anticipated, particularly after the monumental March 2008 elections, remains to be seen.

Ibrahim Suffian focuses on the role of the internet as a conduit for expressing a public desire for political change in those 2008 general elections. According to Suffian, Malaysia's ruling coalition failed to comprehend the reach and transmission network of opposition and dissident citizen communications in the election campaign. Citing a post-election survey, he notes that more than two-thirds of the Malaysian electorate had access to information about the elections from sources other than the mainstream media, such as the internet, leaflets, and activist meetings. With an increasingly young electorate, Suffian concludes, this is merely the beginning of a wider role for information and communication technology in Malaysian political and social discourse.

In the next article, Duncan McCargo examines the changing dynamics of voter mobilisation in Thailand. The rise of Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai and its successor parties in recent years has been hailed as evidence of new modes of political marketing in Thailand, reflecting a global shift towards ideologically lightweight, leader-centred campaign styles. While such claims contain elements of truth, McCargo argues that Thai elections also continue to be characterised by money politics, vote-buying, and clientelist methods of vote-harvesting, especially but not solely in rural constituencies. As illustrated here by McCargo, the resulting picture is a complex and somewhat contradictory one.

Following on from this analysis, Pravit Rojanaphruk discusses the contested meaning of democracy and the deepening political crisis in Thailand since 2006. Underlying this crisis, Rojanaphruk notes, is a debate about the appropriate role of the monarchy in the future of Thai politics and society, an issue that cannot be discussed openly without risking severe punishment under lèse majesté legislation, which carries a maximum punishment of 15 years of imprisonment. Rojanaphruk shows how this constraint shapes Thai political discourse and impacts upon the on-going protests.

The article by Eva-Lotta Hedman shifts attention to the Philippines, where a succession of 'reformist' or 'populist' campaigns has accompanied presidential elections since the restoration of formal democratic institutions in 1986. Identifying key political, social, and economic conditions associated with such changing forms of voter mobilisation, Hedman highlights the considerable staying power of money, machine politics and electoral fraud in Philippine elections. With reference to the 2010 general elections scheduled for 10 May, Hedman argues, the phenomenon of 'political branding' of candidates and their platforms and parties has made evident inroads, supplementing more familiar modes of voter mobilisation in the country.

Staying with the Philippines, in the final paper, Emmanuel Yujuico turns to a discussion of information communication technology (ICT). Yujuico charts the diffusion of various forms of ICT in the Philippines, including cell phones and the internet, with particular focus on social networking sites. He also offers a brief examination of the usage of these technologies in the context of the 10 May 2010 Philippine general elections. While these technologies cannot be said to represent a 'bottom up' movement, Yujuico suggests, they are nevertheless becoming increasingly vital components of election campaigns in the digital age.

Overall, this special report points to shifting patterns in voter mobilisation across Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines. As campaign managers, media consultants, and public opinion surveys contribute to reshaping electoral processes in Southeast Asia, as elsewhere, further research in this area is important for our understanding of the travails of democracy in the region, as the myriad ways in which political candidates seek to appeal to voters across the region raise questions about Southeast Asian electorates and the complex and rapidly changing sociological landscapes in which they are embedded. ■

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