

***Political Parties and Electoral Strategy: The Development of Party Organization in East Asia.* By Olli Hellmann. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Hardcover: 199pp.**

When Adam Przeworsky, about a decade ago, warned that we still do not understand political parties very well, and that this important topic had been neglected, the political science community, apart from scholars building on Mainwaring and Scully's 1995 seminal work on party institutionalization in Latin America, did not react immediately with concrete studies of how political parties work on the ground. This is especially true when it comes to the study of Asian political parties, which is why Hellman's new book — which covers South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia and the Philippines — is so timely and important.

Like most of the political party literature, which tends to be top-heavy with theoretical and methodological debates, Hellmann convincingly introduces over some thirty pages his “historical institutionalist” approach as a more holistic perspective and sensible compromise between competing schools of thought in party theory. And, fortunately, the warning of Sherlock Holmes — that it is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data, because one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts — has been well heeded by the author. He does have data, sometimes in breathtaking amounts and details on sixteen parties in the four countries he covers, but whether all these data details are necessary for Hellman's scholarly purposes may be debatable. Knowing all the factions and their political leaders by name and when they won against their rivals and by which strategy in the ever changing big chameleon parties of South Korea may not always explain the outcomes. Especially during the era of the “three Kims”, with their complete control over funds and candidate nominations, internal party factions had little impact. The Kims' dominating power neutralized nearly all attempts to oppose them by organizational or programmatic strategies until their lame duck-phase at the end.

In Taiwan, where Hellman covers the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) as the two dominant parties, their internal factions played a bigger role in shaping not only election strategies but also their organizational changes and developments. And he shows convincingly how the parties and factions within them fought over the central issue of cross-strait relations. However, it would have been useful to include the special

role of Taiwanese returning from the United States and their input in party development, especially in the DPP with its long history of being suppressed by the KMT authorities. The widening of political and democratic space is very much due to this struggle.

Taiwan and Korea share the common legacy of Japanese occupation and colonization, and it is highly probable that Japanese democratic development after the Second World War was observed by many Taiwanese and Koreans during the authoritarian era, providing a reference point for their own opposition to authoritarian politics. Other commonalities include similar legal systems influenced by continental European traditions and that in both countries there has been a tradition of young European-educated lawyers becoming an influential group within the political class. The implication of this tradition for the political arena is that the rule of law can be extended into the legal side of politics, e.g. party law, electoral law, and bylaws of the parliaments, not forgetting that legal entitlements can be used as a political weapon if the judiciary is no longer controlled by an authoritarian government.

The Philippines, very different from its East Asian neighbours, has passed legislation and established institutions to regulate the political arena, but enforcement is very weak and political parties are very volatile. Trying to get systematic access to the Filipino party scene is akin to nailing a pudding to the wall. The most important constant features, well described by Hellman, are the hundred families dominating the political arena since independence in 1946, the patron-client networks and the control of practically all the distribution of pork by the president, and the consensus among the feuding elites to keep everything as it is. Hellmann's conclusion that formal party organization in the Philippines is a mere illusion is undoubtedly correct, but his exception, Akbayan, as model of a more programmatic and member-based party, has so far been rather unsuccessful in elections. It may be tempting to analyse Akbayan as "a different kind of party", but this temptation may come from the fact that the party is closer to Western concepts and party theory, which the author often takes as reference points. In Ian Marsh's *Democratisation, Governance and Regionalism in East and Southeast Asia* (2006), Jean Blondel has shown that Western party theory hardly fits the Southeast Asian context.

Similarly confusing from a Western perspective is the dynamic development of party politics in Indonesia where a wide expanse of democratic space opened up after the fall of Soeharto in 1998. Interestingly, Indonesian politicians have managed to contain the

mushrooming of new parties by successful political and electoral engineering. Hellmann is realistic in his conclusion that party programmes and programme-based strategies are missing, with the possible exception of the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS). Otherwise charisma and money tip the scale, which contradicts the comparison with classical cadre and mass parties.

While the book offers many details and insights, predominantly for political scientists, some of the conclusions are somewhat trivial. Sure, “politicians can always develop alternative electoral strategies”, and “we should not rule out the possibility of different types of political parties emerging within the same party system” (p. 147). This is why real politics is so exciting and so difficult to compress into scholarly works. The subtitle of the book, “The Development of Party Organization in East Asia” may sound a bit too ambitious given the selection of only four countries, which are difficult to compare anyway: East and Southeast Asia are worlds apart in many ways, from colonial and cultural or religious heritage to legal systems, economic performance and party formation. They should better be compared separately, and a comparative study on Southeast Asia’s political parties has yet to be published.