

Reflections  
on  
DEVELOPMENT  
in  
Southeast Asia

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Reflections  
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Southeast Asia

edited by  
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Lim Teck Ghee





# Introduction

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In 1983, the Rockefeller Foundation announced a programme of social science fellowships for scholars in Southeast Asia and English-speaking Africa to advance knowledge on fundamental development issues in these regions. Although the Foundation did not specify any substantive theme to which proposals were to be directed, it indicated that it was particularly interested in studies which would

1. examine the assumptions underlying alternative development objectives and the relation of these assumptions to development practices and outcomes; and
2. probe the human dimensions of rapid economic and technological change, including the relationship of traditional values, structures and power relations to development aims and institutions, and the concept and role of the state in the development effort.

This volume, which *brings together contributions from the Southeast Asian scholars selected for the fellowships*, represents an important part of the programme which officially ended with an international workshop at Bellagio in September 1985. However, the seven papers included here form only a part of the larger social and historical studies that these chosen scholars are undertaking on the process of development as it relates to their individual societies. In the interests of a manageable volume, I have had to considerably prune down the original manuscript submissions – in one case, the paper published in this volume is only one-third the length of the original submission.

Nevertheless, most if not all of the central concerns that sparked off the Rockefeller Foundation's initiative in this programme are addressed in these edited papers. The volume begins with two papers that focus on Islam and Buddhism and the important role that these organized religions and

their adherents play in the development process in Malaysia and Thailand respectively. However, the approaches that Chandra Muzaffar and Somboon Suksamran employ in emphasizing the need to consider religion as a means to understand the behaviour of individual groups and the society at large, are quite different.

Chandra, in his study of Islamic resurgence, is concerned with examining the broad spectrum of forces – internal and external – that have helped to produce a startling increase in religious consciousness among the Malay community in Malaysia. The contradictions and inadequacies of capitalist development and modern ideology, the material and spiritual insecurities of Malay migrants to urban centres, ethnic dichotomization and polarization between the non-Muslims, non-Malays and the Muslim Malays, and the impact of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which was the first Islamic revolution in modern history, provide the broad context for Islamic resurgence.

In addition, Chandra identifies a number of vested interest groups and organizations that are major actors influencing the substance and course of the new Islamic wave in culture, politics and other aspects of life. The Darul Arqam (an orthodox religious movement), the Angkatan Belia Islam (a Muslim youth movement), the main Malay opposition political party, Parti Islam SeMalaysia, and segments of the ruling Malay political party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) – despite their internecine fighting to claim the right to speak up on behalf of the Muslims – are mainly inclined to enhancing the rituals, symbols, forms and practices of the religion without much consideration as to how Islam can constructively and creatively resolve the shortcomings of a modern economy and society. More disturbing in their espousal of an enlarged Islamic role in Malaysia is the lack of concern for the sensitivities of other religions and cultural groups in a multiracial and multi-religious nation. Indeed, the most important outcome of the deepening Islamization process is the increase in ethnic and religious polarization. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to share Chandra's optimism that a progressive Islamization process rather than the prevalent conservative one can bring about a societal transformation that can be viewed with equanimity or confidence by the non-Muslims.

Somboon's study is cast over a less ambitious canvas. Drawing on fieldwork conducted with what he refers to as "development monks" in North Thailand, he draws a profile of a movement that has recently emerged among a section of the rank and file monks, aimed at freeing the rural people they live with from exploitation, poverty and ignorance through a variety of grassroot-oriented activities and programmes. Whilst the involvement of monks in social service has long been a tradition in Thailand, Somboon argues that the new movement is remarkable in a number of ways. Not only are the monks working independently of the control of government and the *Sangha* (monk) authorities, but their concepts, strategies and approaches to development can be considered to comprise alternatives

to conventional ones in that they are concerned with ends that are rooted in the Buddhist ethical-social system as much as they are concerned with attacking the material causes of poverty. It is interesting to note that, in this work, Somboon has repudiated his earlier disapproval of *Sangha* involvement in rural development, a disapproval based on fear that the monks might be co-opted into the government structure through development work and be manipulated for political ends.

In responding to the material needs of the local communities, activist monks in Thailand are pursuing a course of inserting religion into the lives of the people, which is very different from that followed in Malaysia where the consciousness-raising and community-mobilizing efforts of Islamic leaders and clergy have been directed at the high ground of national politics. In both cases, whether successful or not, the impact is likely to pose new and difficult questions, not only in the realms of everyday life and politics but also for the dogmas of the religions concerned, and their notions of purity and spirituality, besides calling into question the "correctness" of involved clergy and religious leaders.

These efforts, whether ambitiously aimed at directly involving religion in national politics or using it more modestly to resolve some of the everyday problems of communities are, of course, not unique to Southeast Asia. Elsewhere in Latin America, Africa and other parts of the world where a clear dividing line has yet to be drawn between secular and religious life, much controversy still exists on what role religion should play, especially in public life. Together with studies from other societies, the Southeast Asian ones offer a wealth of material from which to obtain a better perspective of this ongoing drama. In all these instances, whilst not questioning the wisdom or sincerity of proponents who argue that an enhanced role for religion can provide a continuing sense of historical consciousness and source of identity to communities that might otherwise lose their moorings in the modern development process, it is important to be reminded that frequently it is narrow, parochial and even dogmatic religious and political interests rather than enlightened, democratic and emancipatory ones which are working towards an enhanced role.

Transformed religions might yet have an important contribution to make to the formulation and implementation of alternative ideologies erected on more lofty ideals and principles while meeting the mundane material needs of modern economy and life in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Still, it is the bureaucracy that mans the infrastructure of state systems and leaves imprints on the lives of ordinary people. In Thailand, a considerable bureaucratic apparatus has grown up since the 1850s to administer law, run schools, provide medical services and undertake other house-keeping chores of the modern state. Kanok Wongtrangan's study focuses on what he calls the dual-value behaviour of Thai bureaucracy which, in his opinion, "is more important than any political institution in the Thai political system".

Thai bureaucracy is comprised of modern administrative values or the "bureaucratic code" centred on conventional principles of scientific administration, including specialization, impersonalization, differentiation and deculturalization, and traditional values, or the personal relations bond based on clientship, and associated with traditional Thai social values. This dual-value behaviour, together with what Kanok identifies as the "risk" factor (assessed on such indicators as degree of politicization, number of bureaucratic agencies involved, degree of public understanding and degree of participation by interest groups) is held to be largely instrumental in deciding the responses of Thai bureaucrats in national policy-making and implementation.

After discussing how rice-price policy and land-reform policy have been influenced by the dual-value behaviour of policy-makers, Kanok points out that any approach that excludes either the bureaucratic code or personal relations bond in the development process is bound to be ineffectual. He suggests that a possible alternative approach to development should systematically utilize the two-value system. Finally, he makes the telling point that even when public participation is brought to bear on Thai bureaucracy, informal clientship and personal relations tend to be influential in the "participation" and decisive in the outcome.

Unfortunately, Kanok does not specify how personal relations can be used as a tool to achieve development objectives nor does he explain how it can be implemented in a manner that will not lead to self-interest or abuse of position and undermine efficiency and equity. It is too much to expect a Thai bureaucrat (or any other bureaucrat), if the personal relations bond is sanctioned as part of the modern bureaucratic code, not to use it for personal gain and aggrandizement. The problem that would-be reformers of the bureaucracy confront, of personal social ties and relations coming in the way of what should be neutral policy or decision-making, and resulting in privileged or unequal access, is of course to be found (although less admitted to) even in societies with long-established and model bureaucracies. But the solution appears to lie less in integrating traditional values of relations into new development institutions (at least in this case) than in improving conditions of service within the bureaucracy (low wages and poor working conditions are often the main reasons to explain why many bureaucrats permit their personal relations to influence the conduct of public business), educating the public (for example, on what constitutes correct relations with the bureaucracy and what expectations of public service can be reasonably held), and enforcing stricter standards of neutrality.

Bureaucratic behaviour is influenced not only by old and new values of social conduct and relations but also by the systems used in recording and measuring socio-economic phenomena. The resultant data and policies can help towards the attainment of greater distribution or greater inequalities in the development process. Mahar Mangahas's paper argues that while

people do not hold their political struggles in abeyance of scientific assessment of social problems, there is an important role for information systems that uncover policy errors through surveillance of equity variables. Good socio-economic analysis of a good data base, as he puts it, "when shared with society . . . may make the problem better understood, and allow the solutions to be discovered and applied in a less disruptive and more humane process than otherwise."

In the Philippines, the need for remedying the knowledge gap by identifying distributive justice as a central concern is highlighted in Mahar's recounting of the Filipino historical experience with ideologies of economic inequity and the policies that reinforced them, beginning with pre-Spanish times and ending with the fall of the Marcos regime. The revolution of February 1986 appears to usher a new beginning for the developmental process in its emphasis on the attainment of distributive justice. But the adoption of an official poverty line which will target poverty reduction seems an inadequate data base for monitoring the new goals. In charting future shortfalls and achievements, Mahar calls for a value-conscious economic science that would incorporate new variables such as the classification of actual and potential antipathetic groups including racial and cultural minorities, control over natural resources, indicators of violence, and other variables related to distributive justice into the diagnosis of societal change. In doing so, he emphasizes that it is not enough to accept knowledge as a social product but that it should also be seen as particular products, reflecting the dominant political and administrative structures and processes of their time.

The next two papers move our attention away from the bureaucracy, its behaviour and its instruments of operation, and questions related to technical and conceptual considerations within the confines of policy-making to the larger edifice of the state, controlled by bureaucrats, politicians, technocrats, capitalists and other power-holders. However, their authors approach this important subject in rather different ways. Arief Budiman's study builds upon the tradition of Marxist studies concerned with explaining social change through a class struggle perspective. He focuses on Indonesia as an example of a strong, relatively autonomous authoritarian state which, however, has failed to develop an efficient state bureaucracy while, at the same time, has stifled the growth of a strong bourgeoisie outside the state sector.

Employing a historical perspective, he begins with an examination of the colonial state in Indonesia under the Dutch and its maintenance of a feudal structure upon which Dutch capitalism was superimposed. In this system dominated by foreigners, neither the indigenous land-owners nor urban bourgeoisie were able to develop, a situation which partially changed during the first decade after independence when the Indonesian bourgeoisie came into political power and control of the state bureaucracy. However,

the establishment of numerous state enterprises stifled development. The smaller number of independent local enterprises and the conditions of political and economic instability that preceded and followed Soekarno's downfall in 1965 further prevented any strong expansion of the local bourgeoisie. State support of "client" bourgeoisie (private businessmen dependent on state business patronage for their survival) and the cultivation of the Indonesian Chinese bourgeoisie group by the New Order government of Soeharto further stifled the development of an independent indigenous bourgeoisie. Behind these moves was the fear that an independent indigenous bourgeoisie might become a political competitor to the present military-dominated élite. Thus, the last two decades of Indonesian history, in Arief's opinion, have seen the steady emergence of the bureaucratic capitalist state, and explain the inability of the Indonesian economy to achieve the same progress and transformation that has taken place in South Korea, another example of a strong authoritarian state.

In contrasting South Korea with Indonesia, and in arriving at the conclusion that "development in Indonesia managed by a bureaucratic capitalist state is . . . more a political problem than an economic one" Arief seems to agree with the World Bank's advocacy of deregulation and development of a "normal" capitalist system as the answer to Indonesia's economic woes. Given the potent mix of contending forces, including the military, Muslim religious groups and new political forces, and their widely opposed perceptions of societal change, including economic, it could be that such an evolution might be the least traumatic alternative in a slate of difficult options. However, adverse developments in the international economy, on which Indonesian exports are dependent, could still have a deciding effect and help produce an even more unstable future.

Whilst Arief is preoccupied with exposing the limitations of the Indonesian state and its role in the development process, Reynaldo Ileto is concerned with questioning the legitimacy of the "linear development" mode of comprehending national problems and prospects and, with it, implicitly, the model of the modern state and what and whom it stands for. Drawing on his studies of state approaches to key medical episodes in Philippine history, including the 1820, 1882, and 1902 cholera epidemics, Ileto shows that the colonial medical and administrative remedies have proceeded along basic assumptions of the rationality, progress and infallibility of modern science and its practitioners, as against what was perceived to be the ignorance, superstition and backwardness of traditional folk medicine and its native curers and herbalists. In turn, they have generated historical writing and moulded national consciousness which have suppressed various unsavoury aspects of colonial health development, including the ineffectiveness of much of the new science, the disciplining of the masses, the supervision and regulation of more and more aspects of life to meet the needs of disease control and the repression of forms of

resistance and disorder deemed as inimical to “progressive” development. The implantation of certain notions of modernity and scientific attributes was also associated with the hegemony of town centres and outside learning and, together with the repudiation of what was unscientific, disorderly or deviationist as irrational and backward, has become a continual thread running through Filipino history, whether from the liberal or radical tradition.

In addition to medical histories, Iletto analyses Filipino banditry and illicit associations to illustrate state attempts to ignore or marginalize the “dark side”, despite the latter’s claim to authenticity and inclusion in the new order. Whilst Iletto’s work does not distil from the various experiences of the “dark side” an alternative development ideology, his plea that “a reflection on development has to take into account those things which have stood in opposition to it” since those “irreducible differences . . . in the final analysis may be our only way out of the present development bind” is a timely reminder of our need to remove the blinkers that stand in the way of remembrance of (and learning from) experiences and events denied a place in history.

The final paper by Lim Teck Ghee similarly proceeds from the assumption that the state in Southeast Asia is far from being a beneficial protector of society or a neutral arbiter in the development process. As it grows increasingly strong and effective in its outreach, the need for effective and knowledgeable countervailing groups in society becomes correspondingly more necessary. Voluntary non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have now become well established in many parts of the world, and there is increasing evidence that they possess much potential for generating or energizing grass-root development and mobilizing public participation to act as a check to the excesses of the state.

Beginning with some general information about the social and political framework within which the new NGO movement is located in the ASEAN region, the paper provides brief country profiles of NGOs and the specific problems they face in the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, before proceeding to a detailed case study of the interaction between a local NGO and a fishing village that resulted in local community mobilization and consciousness-raising, and a new socio-economic development project. The case study in particular shows that NGOs are well-fitted to play the role of activist reform groups and that the most energetic and committed of them might well make a wide national impact on an array of socio-economic issues such as environmental pollution, lack of access to basic needs and exploitation of labour. However, it also demonstrates that long-term solutions to these issues are often beyond the intellectual and resource reach of NGOs. Instead, solutions demand a blend of community acceptance, hard work, good leadership, correct knowledge as well as some unique ingredients that are difficult to anticipate or predict, even when drawing upon the past experiences of social action. This complexity makes

alternative development work all the more challenging. It also poses the intriguing question to social scientists on the degree of generalization that might be gleaned from social action to serve useful purposes.

Lim Teck Ghee