

***The Institutional Imperative: The Politics of Equitable Development in Southeast Asia.* By Erik Martinez Kuhonta. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011. Hardcover: 352pp.**

Southeast Asia's "miracle" growth was both rapid and relatively equitable. Much work has been done to analyse the causes of growth and the development of a capitalist class in Southeast Asia, but far less attention has been paid to understanding how lower income groups came to benefit from this process. In this book, Erik Martinez Kuhonta asks how the politics of Southeast Asian countries can account for differing outcomes in poverty reduction and equity across the region. His answer is that poverty reduction requires appropriate institutions, particularly political parties.

Kuhonta provides us with an in depth comparison of the political economy of growth in Malaysia (equitable) and Thailand (less so) and a shorter extension of these findings to Vietnam (equitable) and the Philippines (less so). He argues that in the success cases the poor achieved significant institutional representation in political parties embodying a broad-based social coalition. The breadth of coalition ensured that parties were "pragmatic" in the sense that they rarely pursued poverty reduction at the expense of social stability and growth. At the same time, to secure an important rural support base, parties created institutions that penetrated the local level in rural areas. These institutional structures sustained political support and provided channels for rural concerns to be fed upwards from the local level to relatively receptive central policy-makers.

In the less equitable cases, the poor were represented by civil society organizations (CSOs) but they failed to find an institutional place in the party system, which remained elite dominated, despite constitutional democracy. In both the Philippines and Thailand, elite-dominated parties in fragmented party systems tended to obtain rural support through vote-buying and patronage. CSOs were sometimes able to influence the policy agenda to overthrow particular groups of elites or affect specific policy areas but this success was not institutionalized into sustained political influence.

Kuhonta argues that institutional analysis tells us more than explanations based on democratization, class alliances or the inter-ethnic balance of power. Democracy can fail to represent the poor where they remain excluded from party systems. Different historical experiences of state formation in Southeast Asia mean that there are few examples of the archetypal European alliance between middle

and working classes emerging in opposition to a traditional ruling elite, though Malaysia perhaps comes closest. While the equilibrium between Malay political power and Chinese economic power might appear to explain the structure of Malaysian politics, similar balances in Fiji or Sri Lanka (reviewed in the book's appendix) turned out very differently.

However, Kuhonta does not argue that institutions explain everything. They are a necessary, rather than sufficient, condition for pro-poor growth and institutions themselves to emerge from complex historical processes. The case studies therefore present a rich historical picture, which is a particular strength of the book. Given the relative lack of studies of inequality and poverty reduction in the literature on Southeast Asia, Kuhonta's excellent histories should provide a widely useful resource for those interested in Southeast Asian poverty policy. Many readers will know little, for example, about agricultural extension work in Malaysia during the 1970s, the precursors to Thaksin's 30 Baht health card scheme, or the history of attempted land reforms across the region.

Kuhonta's choice to emphasize aspects of politics and policy that are self-consciously concerned with equity and rural development is what makes this book an important contribution to scholarship on Southeast Asia. With that base to start from, it would now be interesting to re-integrate his work with the traditional emphasis on Southeast Asian patterns of economic structure and capital formation. Kuhonta's argument emphasizes active attempts to promote equity through government policy, responding to the political influence of poorer groups. The (largely implicit but discernable) economic model in Kuhonta's book is one in which poverty reduction takes place through support for agriculture, human capital building (health and education policy) and deliberate efforts to help rural workers make the transition to the urban economy (through skills training and affirmative action). Success would seem to rely on a successful strategy to promote relatively labour intensive growth in the formal economy but Kuhonta says relatively little about forms of industrialization (such as the Southeast Asian emphasis on export-oriented foreign direct investment).

In terms of further research, the extent to which the kinds of pro-poor policy Kuhonta demonstrates are dependent on a particular kind of growth is an important one. Most obviously, one might ask whether relative failure in the Philippines was just about the lack of pro-poor institutions or also due to a quite different economic structure. Similarly, one might ask whether Golkar in Indonesia did

as much as the United Malays National Organization in Malaysia to foster equitable growth, or whether poverty reduction in the former was more of an unintended consequence of a particular growth model. Is Kuhonta's vision of integrated parties representing the poor and the middle-class only viable in the context of a particular kind of economic growth or might it apply more universally? It would be difficult to imagine this sort of strategy working in the Latin American context where import substitution was combined with a much more skewed distribution of rural assets. Under those circumstances it is also difficult to imagine the development of the kinds of broad-based political parties Kuhonta describes.

In theoretical and methodological terms, questions about the structure of growth within which redistributive policies took place might then point to the return of class-based analysis to Kuhonta's story. To what extent were the party coalitions Kuhonta identifies only possible in the context of the particular ways in which capitalism emerged in some Southeast Asian countries? One might point to the weakness of indigenous rural elites in Southeast Asia, combined with a relatively even land distribution and a domestic capitalist class that was politically insecure. The kind of sophisticated neo-Marxist analysis produced by authors like Robison, Hadiz, Hewison, Gomez and Jomo, ought to have interesting things to say here but their emphasis has so far tended to be on the role of elites more than on the consequences for poorer groups.

Overall Kuhonta's book is an excellent starting point for reinvigorating long-neglected debates about poverty and equity in Southeast Asia. It is theoretically and historically sophisticated, contains a wealth of information about social policy in Southeast Asia that is otherwise hard to access, and sets out some provocative ideas that deserve to be taken up and debated by scholars of Southeast Asian political economy from a wide range of theoretical perspectives.

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