

***Blood and Silk: Power and Conflict in Modern Southeast Asia.* By Michael Vatikiotis. London: Weidenfield & Nicholson, 2017. Softcover: 336pp.**

Southeast Asia has long been a paradox in modern geopolitics. A region home to over 600 million people, some of the world's most dynamic economies, and the crucial straits linking the Pacific and Indian Oceans, it somehow manages to evade serious and sustained scrutiny in the foreign ministries of the Great Powers, newspapers and major strategic journals of the twenty-first century. The world's eyes tend to gravitate towards Southeast Asia's two giant neighbours China and India, or further afield to the Middle East. And when attention does fleetingly fall on Southeast Asia, it tends to drift away soon after, satisfied with tired bromides about the region's stability and developmental focus.

*Blood and Silk*, the most recent book of long-time Southeast Asia resident and journalist Michael Vatikiotis, is a welcome tonic for this widespread myopia about Southeast Asia. Engagingly-written, doggedly honest and acutely analytical, *Blood and Silk* seeks to introduce readers to the deep complexities and often overlooked injustices and challenges that characterize this complex region. At the outset, Vatikiotis observes, "one of the first things I have learned about the part of Asia I have called home for the past 30 years is to be wary of explanations. To get too comfortable with explaining a certain trend or phenomena is to forget the exception lurking around the corner, to mistake change for continuity, and to assume that something discovered is a new phenomenon" (p. 11).

Vatikiotis seeks to convey the fingertips experience of a lifetime of journalism in the countries of Southeast Asia by presenting a gritty, realist and deeply humanist account of the region. *Blood and Silk* is a meditation on "the interplay of power, privilege and violent conflict" (p. 11) that rarely makes the news either within or beyond Southeast Asia. There are separate chapters on the history and persistence of powerful and charismatic leaders in the region; on the structural dominance and selfishness of elites and the suffering of the poor and powerless; on the impunity of the powerful; on the shortcomings of moments of liberalization and the workings of democracy; and on corruption, ethnic conflicts, the rise of identity politics and extremist Islam. Each chapter interweaves history, analysis and personal anecdote, artfully drawing

the reader into a sobering and often alarming understanding of Southeast Asian societies. Writes Vatikiotis: “despite its history of presenting an open face to the world, the region harbours many dark secrets” (p. 39).

Three themes run through *Blood and Silk*: the entrenched power of each society’s elites and their self-centred willingness to trample on the rights and opportunities of their fellow citizens; the fraying of traditions of tolerance and inclusion and the rise of deadly identity politics; and the destabilizing influence of external forces. Vatikiotis considers Southeast Asia’s fate in the face of the rise of China, ultimately concluding that it will soon become part of a Sino-centric order. He is abruptly dismissive of Southeast Asian states’ capacity or willingness to resist this fate or the ability of the United States, Japan or India to counterbalance China’s power. The latter two countries are adjudged too insular and culturally disconnected to wield influence in Southeast Asia — a somewhat odd conclusion given the deep and enduring legacies of Hindu and Buddhist cultures in the region.

The final chapter looks to Southeast Asia’s future. Despite observing that “there is a degree of empowerment that is slowly changing the distribution of power, affecting the shape of states and the geopolitical landscape” (p. 296), Vatikiotis sees little prospect of genuine and broad liberalization for the region’s semi-authoritarian states and almost-democracies. He does not speculate as to how the “degree of empowerment” (p. 296) will play out, or indeed affect the shape of states and geopolitical landscapes. What he does suggest is that empowerment will be partial and isolated, developing in pockets rather than across entire societies. His view of the entrenched nature of elite privilege leaves little room for major transformative change.

Rather, he argues that the struggle for, and resistance to, liberalization will lead to instability: “The immediate future of Southeast Asia looks certain to be characterised by enduring struggles for equality and freedom” (p. 297). Climate change will add to Southeast Asia’s uncertain future, as low-lying cities such as Jakarta and Bangkok face salinization and rising sea levels. Nor is his vision of the geopolitical fate of the region very encouraging. He sees little future for ASEAN or the economic or security benefits it brings to its member states. Rather, he sees the region in 2050 returning to a pre-colonial past, where ASEAN’s “ten member states will have become more aligned on the basis of geography and economic dependency — mostly with China” (p. 300).

Whether or not one agrees with Vatikiotis' rather bleak conclusions, it is hard not to thoroughly enjoy the journey on which he takes the reader. There is a great deal of thought-provoking material on offer in *Blood and Silk*, making it essential reading for both new and longstanding observers of regional affairs.

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