

BOOK REVIEWS

***Mobilizing for Elections: Patronage and Political Machines in Southeast Asia.* By Edward Aspinall, Meredith L. Weiss, Allen Hicken and Paul D. Hutchcroft. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Hardcover: 312pp.**

Mobilizing for Elections is the capstone to a remarkably productive project led by four influential political scientists of Southeast Asia—Edward Aspinall, Meredith Weiss, Allen Hicken and Paul Hutchcroft (henceforth AWHH). Primarily funded by the Australian Research Council, this decade-long collaboration impressively involved coordinating 200 local researchers in six countries and led to many publications prior to this book. Coordinating the volume’s writing among four established scholars probably proved as challenging. Still, the text succeeds as it reads evenly throughout the book, although one can envision which chapters were the primary responsibility of which author. The main cases cover the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia. Research on Thailand was scuttled by the 2014 coup. As a result, the country was relegated to secondary case status, alongside Singapore and Timor-Leste.

It is not the intent of AWHH to explain *why* money dominates elections in Southeast Asia. Anyone the least bit familiar with democracies knows the outsized role money plays in determining outcomes. One may argue that a signal difference resides in the distinction between the legal and illegal deployment of money. However, as AWHH point out, the on-the-ground or behind-the-scenes reality, including “loopholes”, often blurs such sharp distinctions, in rich and poor countries alike.

Innovatively, AWHH situate their research between the extremes of glitzy, media-blitzed national campaigns, such as presidential contests,

and the excruciating detailed case studies of gritty local elections. On the one hand, the volume showcases plenty of fascinating local colour. For example, through candid interviews with politicians, we learn how campaign teams are assembled, how the quantum of money to be circulated are determined, and how candidates agonize over shirking by team members or voters in receipt of their cash. On the other hand, AWHH seek to explain, first, the broad patterns of patronage and political machines across the three cases, and secondly, to analytically account for and categorize the many sub-patterns of processes and practices across as well as within the cases.

Structurally, AWHH situate the three key forms of mobilizing networks and patronage patterns they identify—party machines in Malaysia, family-led local machines in the Philippines and ad hoc teams in Indonesia—in colonial history. Broadly speaking, Chapter Two demonstrates how British policies facilitated the institutionalization of ethnic party politics in Malaysia and how American policies gave rise to an elite-dominated yet weakly institutionalized party system in the Philippines. At the same time, it also shows how a bloody revolution against the Dutch, among other factors, led to Indonesia being a middle case, possessing a more bottom-up legacy of mobilization with some degree of institutionalized parties. This is partly facilitated by the active political role played by Islam, which is different from the hierarchical Catholic Church's more hands-off approach in the Philippines. But AWHH recognize that relying on colonial history only goes so far; historical determinism can rob local actors of agency.

The second key factor, which analytically spills into Chapter Three, is institutions, especially those from the independence eras. In the Philippines, for example, the decision to institute a one-term presidential limit in the post-Marcos constitution to avoid a repeat of dictatorship has undermined party-building efforts, leading to a rise in the number of personalized parties. Similarly, in Indonesia, a ruling by the Constitutional Court that allowed an open-list ballot has loosened party structures by spurring acute competition for seats among party members. In Malaysia, the lack of significant institutional change for decades explained the country's stultifying politics, as elections were, until 2018, repeatedly won by an inter-ethnic coalition led by the United Malays National Organisation. Some of the book's tables and figures that either summarize the argument—for example, Table 1.1 (p. 12)—or graphically visualize its different components—for example, Figures 3.1 and 3.2 (pp. 76,

88)—are useful, and the authors' coinage of key terms and concepts ("matronage", "credibility buying" and "turf protection", among others) is creative.

Chapters Four to Six systematically describe patronage distribution and mobilizing networks at three levels: first, micro-particularism: candidate's or broker's relations with individual voters that in Indonesia and the Philippines are particularly mediated by money; second, meso-particularism: candidates' promises to deliver club goods—an athletic field, a road, a clinic—if elected to office; and third, macro-particularism: the "hijacking" by politicians of national public policies for the benefit of, and to curry favour with, local voters. These policies may range from subsidized housing and scholarships to cash transfers for the poor.

Chapters Seven and Eight bring to the fore the extensive knowledge that the authors possess of these country cases. AWHH are aware that the credibility of their arguments rests on addressing the influence of non-party factors, such as identity politics, and on handling the appreciable variation of processes and practices within these three countries. This pertains not only to geographical differences but also to the uneven development among the countries under study. The latter point is important because the authors understandably want the book's findings to travel beyond the region and attract the attention of comparative scholars and democracy promoters elsewhere. Their findings seem to corroborate the modernization argument with wealth (and more education) democracies and their voters are more disciplined or lawful, since in AWHH's wealthiest case, that of Malaysia, the prevalence of vote buying (or vote selling) is far less pronounced than in the poorer cases of Indonesia and the Philippines. AWHH cannot deny the association, but they rightly believe that the correlation is less direct than often surmised. In Chapter Eight, they add at least three intervening variables—the degree of concentration of control over economic resources, the strength of the local state and the autonomy and hierarchy of local social networks—that interject a degree of underappreciated complication into the modernization paradigm.

In their thoughtful conclusion, AWHH consider reforms to electoral systems that seemingly disempower voters, erode local bureaucratic capacities and help foster the current democratic backlash pulsating through the region. AWHH survey such popular proposals as enhanced public campaign financing designed to disincentivize politicians from engaging in corrupt activities to raise funds for elections. Without

dismantling the deeper structures of power, some of which underlie the class inequalities that are driving the behaviours AWHH describe, the authors surmise that electoral reforms alone may have limited impact or even backfire. In all, AWHH present us with an instant classic. Future studies will have to reckon with the volume's insights and assess how well these findings endure amid the political and economic changes that are guaranteed to buffet the region in the years ahead.

JAMIE DAVIDSON is Associate Professor at the National University of Singapore. Postal address: Department of Political Science, Block AS 1, Level 4, 11 Arts Link, Singapore 117570; email: poldjs@nus.edu.sg.