

BOOK REVIEWS

***Politics in Southeast Asia: Democracy or Less.* By William Case.**
Richmond, Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, 2002. 318pp.

In its aspirations and accomplishments, *Politics in Southeast Asia* is a much “bigger” book than its length suggests. It transcends significant organizational and editorial flaws to advance a superbly researched, admirably coherent, consideration of political development across five Southeast Asian states. It successfully lifts the region from a scholarly “eddy” (p. 264) in comparative politics into the mainstream of that discipline. Even the strongest critics of William Case’s assumptions and conclusions will profit from studying his book and sharpening their own analyses in response. A major work of social science can serve few more important ends than that one.

Case aims to remove two impediments to the development of systematic, theoretical understandings of Southeast Asian politics. First, the influence and durability of distinct, country-specific interpretive paradigms — neo-patrimonialism for Indonesia, ethnic politics for Malaysia, the bureaucratic polity for Thailand, patron–client ties for the Philippines, and ruling-party dominance for Singapore — have stood in the way of broad intraregional comparison and theory-building. Secondly, and in part as a result, attempts at such comparison have tended either to the unidimensional or to what Case calls the “descriptive stock take” (p. viii). In pushing aside these analytical blockages, Case seeks to advance a rigorous comparative theory of regime outcomes with a sophistication similar to those resulting from the study of Latin America, Iberia, Africa, and Northeast Asia. It should of course be

noted that, at least as concerns the sub-field that we now call “international political economy”, Case’s critique of previous approaches is not entirely convincing. This exception is one that readers would do well to bear in mind when they come to the book’s concluding chapter.

The scholarship in “political economy” with which Case concerns himself strikes him — at least as it relates to the questions of democratization and democratic consolidation which concern him most — as structuralist. He argues that their denial of agency makes structuralist, modernizationist, and culturalist approaches to regime change and regime type incapable of explaining both divergent outcomes among states marked by strong similarities and similar outcomes among states marked by apparent differences. This denial of agency works, *inter alia*, to perpetuate the journalistic association of economic growth with democratization that still disfigures much scholarship on the region. Taking regime type in what he calls “Southeast Asia’s five most developed countries” (p. viii) as his dependent variable, Case makes inter-élite and élite-mass relations the focus of his book. From the start, however, it is clear that for Case political agency in contemporary Southeast Asia rests with the élites rather than the “masses”.

The five chapters that form the core of *Politics in Southeast Asia* examine what Case terms the pseudo-democracy of New Order Indonesia, the semi-democracies of Malaysia and Singapore, and the restored democracies of Thailand and the Philippines. (While introductory allusions to Vietnam and Burma make evident Case’s lively interest in élite politics in those states, his focus on democracy, its stability, and its quality explain their exclusion from detailed consideration.) Each of these chapters explains the place of the state in question in Case’s typology of Southeast Asian regimes, examines its élites and their management of non-élite forces, and offers a sustained illustrative example from recent political history.

While this last feature of the book carries the risk that *Politics in Southeast Asia* will very soon come to seem dated, Case has clearly gambled on the durability of the theoretical generalizations that he draws from the episodes and developments that he treats. His formidable research into these sustained examples reduces that risk considerably. His extended treatment of the long collapse of the Soeharto regime, intended to demonstrate the erosion of pseudo-democracy through mounting élite disunity, is a near-masterpiece. With one significant difference, it calls to mind nothing so much as the numerous classic accounts of the last years of the Shah of Iran.

That difference lies, of course, in the role assigned to social forces. Case’s Southeast Asia is, as he repeatedly makes clear, a zone of “social

quiescence” (for example, see pp. 49, 122, 166), of “masses” managed except at rare moments by élites in democracies, semi-democracies, and pseudo-democracies alike. In writing on Indonesia, then, Case traces processes of urbanization, industrialization, and the resultant social and cultural change that affected tens of millions of Indonesians during the New Order. However, in the end, inter-élite relations determine the course of events, and not just in Case’s Indonesia. In his democratic Southeast Asia, political agency remains an élite phenomenon.

If the chapter on Malaysia assigns explanatory primacy to the ability of national élites to remain cohesive despite periodic “strain points” (pp. 114 ff.), it is the treatment of the Philippines and Thailand that allow Case to address directly democratic stability, democratic quality, and their determinants. Again, these determinants lie in the nature of relations among élites, as cohesive in the former context as they are fragmented in the latter. For all his concern with democratic consolidation, however, some of these two chapters’ contentions appear rather weak.

Case’s pessimism about the stability of Thai democracy is likely to prove unwarranted, and readers may well find his harsh judgement of the quality of Philippine democracy *ad hoc* if commonsensical. Furthermore, the sharp distinctions that Case would draw between “metropolitan” and “provincial” business élites (pp. 156 ff. and 174 ff.) in his discussion of inter-élite competition in Thailand since the 1980s are simplistic at best and meaningless at worst. To be sure, Case is by no means alone in his reading of the Thai private sector and its political roles; it puts him in some very fine company. However, as with his analyses of business élites in other states, that reading may well be too fragile a basis for the claims made in the book’s conclusion.

The chapter on Singapore is short but effective in advancing Case’s argument for élite agency and the importance of voluntarism in the region’s politics.

For a work of such scope and ambition, *Politics in Southeast Asia* suffers from few apparent errors of detail. The chapter on Thailand would benefit from more systematic, less inconsistent transliteration of Thai names and terms. However, a brief statistical appendix on the five countries studied will come in handy to many readers, and impressive, informative end-notes complement each chapter’s discussion and analysis. At the same time, the very richness of those notes makes Curzon Press’s decision to release a volume of this sort without a bibliography difficult to understand or to countenance.

In other ways, too, Curzon and its editors have served Case poorly. There is good reason to leave to graduate students in political science

such usages as “more than trivial” (p. 27) and “soft-lining élites” (p. 250). Moreover, at roughly fifty dense pages each, the chapters on Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines are just too long. While the book’s broad coverage, its theoretical rigour, its engagement with debates on “third-wave” democratization, its well-narrated episodes of recent political history, and even its appearance in paper-back underline its strong potential for classroom use, the length of the four major substantive chapters is likely to put off many lecturers and students. In some part, that length results from Case’s allowing himself frequent repetition both of fact and of analysis. All too often, he resorts to “In sum” (for example, pp. 108, 126, 143, 155, 157, 213, 237, 264) and other, similar rhetorical devices to begin sentences that recapitulate material already covered. Again, a reviewer cannot avoid the conclusion that Case deserved more engaged, more fully collaborative editors than those with whom he worked.

The concluding chapter of *Politics in Southeast Asia* focuses, somewhat surprisingly, on the centrality of relations between state and business élites as determinants of regime-type outcomes. As throughout the book, Case offers a thoughtful typology among the five countries treated. However, the chapter’s country-by-country sketches of states’ management (in New Order Indonesia and Singapore) and alienation (in Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines) of business élites repeat material introduced in earlier chapters. On the other hand, those chapters did not (as I have already suggested with reference to the Thai case) treat the structure and conduct of Southeast Asian business in anything approaching depth concomitant with the importance that the book’s conclusion would now assign to that component of national élites.

It is tempting to see in Case’s abrupt narrowing of focus to state-business relations in this final chapter an analogous narrowing of his aspirations for *Politics in Southeast Asia*. In the end, one might suspect, he would rather contribute to the important, aforementioned “international political economy” literature on the region than to the debates on broader questions of democratic stability and quality towards which most of the book is oriented. In fact, however, Case seeks to argue that in the salience of state–business relations lies the significance to those broader debates of theoretical insights drawn from Southeast Asia. He pointedly notes the neglect of “the democratizing role of business élites ... in the literature on transitions” (p. 264) and calls for the restoration of “causal weight” to that role (p. 264). If more explicitly anticipated before this final chapter, the point would doubtless be more effective. All the same, both for its ambitiousness and for the skepticism that it is certain to arouse, Case’s closing contention underlines the great value of this book in

stimulating reconsideration of our own understandings of the political orders of democratic Southeast Asia.

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***Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and Practices.* Edited by Francis Loh Kok Wah and Khoo Boo Teik.** Richmond, Surrey, U.K: Curzon Press, 2002. 274pp.

This edited volume of essays examines democracy in Malaysia in the 1990s. It is both a timely and a welcome addition to the growing body of works that have sought to examine the political, social, and economic processes associated with democracy in Malaysia, particularly during the 1990s. The strength of this volume lies in the broad scope of issues that it brings to bear on the study of democracy in Malaysia. The innovative approaches used by the contributors in pursuing the questions posed in each chapter provide the reader with an insight into a set of issues, actors, and processes associated with the study of democracy in Malaysia seldom found in works of a similar nature. Many of the issues and topics raised in these essays are also relevant for comparative political analysis with other cases in Southeast Asia.

The introductory chapter (Chapter 1), written by the editors Khoo Boo Teik and Francis Loh Kok Wah, provides a concise literature review of democracy in Malaysia since independence. It also lays out the wider scope of this volume of essays, which is to provide “an updated examination of Malaysia’s political system, civil society, public institutions and dominant discourses”, as well as to offer a comparative “understanding of ‘discourses and practices of democracy’ in Southeast Asia”.

The rest of the essays in the volume is divided into two parts. The first part, titled “Discourses of Democracy”, comprises essays on developmentalism and democracy, the Asian values debate, and the role of Islam in the democratic politics of Malaysia. This part is comparatively more theoretical in its orientation, particularly in terms of linking some of the political developments in the Malaysian case to the normative and theoretical assumptions found in the literature on democracy. The second part, titled “The Practice of Democracy”, is more empirical in nature, and includes examinations of the media,