

BOOK REVIEWS

***Southeast Asia in the New International Era.* By Clark D. Neher.** Boulder: Westview Press, 1991. 240 pp.

This volume by Clark Neher, Professor of Political Science at Northern Illinois University, is an excellent overview of government and politics of Southeast Asia. The volume considers the social, political, and economic forces shaping the politics and development of Southeast Asian nations. A prominent feature of *Southeast Asia in the New International Era* is Neher's argument that "a new era in international relations has arisen in the last several decades with important repercussions for Southeast Asia" (p. 1). Within this context of global political change, Neher examines each Southeast Asian nation "in terms of its major institutions, degree of democratization, movement toward economic development, foreign policy, and the role of the state" (p. 2). In this formulation, Neher presents two dimensions of analysis which are rarely considered in a systematic fashion. First, Neher incorporates recent theoretical work in the field of comparative politics on the "strength of the state". Secondly, Neher considers the "democratization process" in the light of the waves of democratic changes evident throughout the world in recent years.

This book is exceptionally well organized and clearly written. It begins with an introduction to Southeast Asia as a region, noting shared factors such as colonialism and nationalism while also recognizing the diversity of different national experiences. The second chapter reviews major global and regional political and economic changes, especially in the past decade. The major part of the text consists of separate chapters on each of the ten Southeast Asian nations. The most comprehensive sections are on

Thailand and the Philippines. Neher explains that these countries provide interesting models to examine in greater detail the role of the state, the levels of economic development, and democratization. Additionally, these are the nations in which Neher specializes.

In each country chapter, Neher examines "institutions and social groups", considering patron-client relations, constitutions, legislatures, political parties, bureaucracies, and the military. The sections on democratization note each country's political culture, history of democratic practices, and prospects for a democratic future. Under the "economic development" sections, basic indicators such as growth rates, gross national product (GNP), integration into the global market economy, and quality of life indices are examined. The foreign policy sections give brief outlines of the nations' primary international orientations, with heavy emphasis on relations with the United States. The sections on the role of the state consider such issues as the relative legitimacy of governments, the relationship of the state and its policies for economic development, and the relative "strength" of the state compared with other institutions and groups, both in the country and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Many of the chapters also contain sub-themes, particularly the role of women in politics and minority Chinese populations.

Neher draws on recent theoretical and comparative literature in the sections on the role and strength of the state. What is most interesting in this discussion is not the attempt to determine whether a given Southeast Asian state is strong or weak. Indeed, Neher acknowledges throughout the book that differential weighing of strong state criteria can lead to inconclusive findings as to a state's strength. For example, Neher observes that "the Thai state can be viewed as either strong or weak, depending on the issues and state components one chooses to emphasize. These characterizations can also change over time" (p. 46). On Burma, Neher argues, "Like the Thai state, the Burmese state can be viewed as strong or weak" (p. 153). Cambodia is seen as having fulfilled one of the conditions for a strong state (massive social dislocation) and yet remains weak (p. 189). Therefore, the value of the "role of the state" approach is not in explaining which states are "strong" or "weak". Rather, Neher's analysis of the state helps us understand what states actually "do", how state objectives are or are not met, the role of the state in economic development, and the relationship of the state to other forces and institutions in society.

When any book dealing with contemporary politics is published, it runs the risk of being dated by the time it is in the readers' hands. Therefore, continued scholarly relevance lies not so much in being up-to-date *per se*, as in the consideration of significant social, economic, and political developments which may support re-evaluation of existing analyses.

Southeast Asia in the New International Era will retain its relevance because the author adds analysis not previously examined in a comprehensive fashion. For example, in considering new models of analysis, Neher suggests that it is no longer appropriate to consider Thailand as a "bureaucratic polity", which was, previously, the most popular analytical point of reference for Thailand. Neher effectively demonstrates that politics in Thailand is no longer confined within the bureaucracy and that external (non-bureaucratic) institutions have increasing significance for Thai politics (p. 42).

There are three interrelated issues that Neher raises for discussion in the volume, which suggest the need for additional study: human rights, democracy, and leadership succession. Neher mentions human rights with reference to three countries: Burma, Vietnam, and Cambodia. In addition to these nations, it would also be useful to examine human rights and politics in the ASEAN states. Human rights issues are often inextricably tied to the democratization processes in these countries and thereby demand systematic analysis. Additionally, leadership succession issues may be the key political dynamic of the 1990s in Southeast Asia as they are closely related to the democratization process in several nations, such as Indonesia and Thailand.

Finally, concerning the democratization process, Neher discusses whether the countries' political cultures and traditions are suited to the establishment of democracy. In the chapter on Laos, Neher observes that "democracy is difficult even under the best of circumstances but especially in nations whose culture and traditions are antithetical to democratic practices" (p. 203). We have, however, witnessed a sufficiently wide range of political democracy among different traditions and cultures to warrant caution in downgrading the chances for democratization in particular nations.

Professor Neher has written an extremely useful and important book for several reasons. This volume fills a continuing need for good textbooks on Southeast Asian government and politics, one of which was Neher's earlier *Politics in Southeast Asia* (1987). The book is also a significant contribution for Southeast Asian specialists, as well as those more generally interested in practical and theoretical questions of comparative politics in the developing world. Moreover, *Southeast Asia in the New International Era* is important in that it highlights significant areas of study which require systematic and careful analysis, especially the role of the state and the process of democratization in Southeast Asia.

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