Challenging Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia: Comparing Indonesia and Malaysia. **Edited by Ariel Heryanto and Sumit K. Mandal**. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003. 247pp.

This is a very thoughtful collection of essays that seeks to capture what the Asian financial crisis of 1997–99 did to the old and new social and political forces found in two neighbouring countries, Indonesia and Malaysia. These neighbours have not often been directly compared with each other in the past and, even though the period under study is short, both have yielded fascinating stories. The stress here is on stories because the six authors have deliberately avoided doing what many social scientists tend to do, that is, to concentrate on formal institutions and structures and the powerful elites that manipulate them, or to draw conclusions from empirical data that have been selected with certain theoretical models in mind. The authors offer instead their re-interpretations of concepts like authoritarianism and democracy, and use thick description to raise interesting questions about the various manifestations of the concepts in two different parts of Southeast Asia. In an important introductory essay, the editors throw doubt on recent debates that have polarized the two concepts and concentrated on how and when democracy would displace authoritarianism. They show that, at least for Indonesia and Malaysia, especially in the contexts of Prime Minister Mahathir's sacking of his heir apparent, Anwar Ibrahim, and the fall of President Soeharto, two themes that loom large throughout the volume, a wide range of people responded in greatly varied ways. Their actions reveal many layers of "oppositional politics" and suggest that, when authoritarianism is challenged today, many kinds of players come on the stage. These do not necessarily represent democratic progress, no more than what those in power or with influence do in response should be classed as typically authoritarian.

The six essays seek out different sets of actors. The first three provide an interesting overlap between the middle classes and the working classes. Ariel Heryanto begins with the most prominent, the new middle classes in Indonesia and Malaysia. The two countries have produced different kinds of intellectuals and professionals because their postcolonial experiences are totally unlike. He gives examples from the behaviour of academics in two universities, the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur and the Satya Wichana Christian University in Salatiga, after they had experienced decades of authoritarian rule. In addition, he also uses the example of media professionals who belong to a similar middle class and seem divided in comparable ways in their attitudes towards authoritarianism. Philip Kelly offers two layers of

comparison: on the one hand, middle class initiatives in building civil society as contrasted with working class indifference; on the other, an early urban environment like the island of Penang and a newly opened up industrial zone like the island of Batam. That they should both be so different is not surprising, but the details of the constraints on civil society even in an old trading hub like Georgetown are fascinating. Batam is too young a development to provide conclusive evidence about how the working class might grow, but the third essay by Vedi Hadiz clearly shows how the working classes have been tamed by decades of anti-communist and anti-socialist policies in both countries. His focus on the missed opportunities for labour organizations after 1997 makes the story even more poignant, but there is no mistaking the success of the fragmentation policies of authoritarian governments. This has made it difficult to see how labour can in future bargain for better terms as globalization bites deeper into the two economies.

The next two essays come at oppositional positions from different starting points but converge on the activism of women as they recognize the maleness of recent authoritarian trends. Norani Othman relates Islamization to democracy but her essay makes clear that the test of that connection would have to be found in how Islam deals with the place of women and non-Muslims. But her sense of history leads her away from confrontational approaches to the need for the judicial use of tradition itself to underline the democratic elements in the origins of Islam. Melani Budianta tackles the realities of the Indonesian tragedy of the 1990s during which "otherness" (whether it was Chinese, Acehnese, East Timorese or West Irianese) and womanhood were equally brutalized. By drawing on her personal involvement in efforts by women activists to correct the cover-ups concerning the rape of Chinese women in 1998 and open up similar issues elsewhere in the country, she gives a compelling account of how many ways authoritarianism could be challenged outside of government. Finally, Sumit Mandal brings a fresh perspective to what arts workers can do to subvert official or long-accepted worldviews, albeit often in diffuse and tangential ways. Perhaps even more than activist women, these arts workers come from all classes and, although most of them work in small groups and reach minority audiences, challenge us to think of them as the most naturally democratic. When seen as no threat to the establishment, their democratic instincts may have the best chance of all to survive.

Together, the six essays and the incisive introduction provide some new ways of looking at authoritarianism in the region. Whether soft or hard, the phenomenon needs to be better understood in local contexts. The remedy against its persistence and its spread may not be found in borrowing from the West and confronting it with set arguments

about democracy being the only antidote to this particular ailment. The essays here explore the variety and dynamism of specific responses to repressive acts and institutions. They demonstrate that too much attention to the politicians, soldiers and bureaucrats would weaken our ability to recognize the turbulent emotions that state actors are stirring up among a wide variety of people not accustomed to the uses of power. By recording what some such people are trying to do, the authors here alert us to the possibilities ahead. To keep such records from wandering aimlessly in all directions is far from easy. The editors are to be commended for keeping their colleagues focused on the central theme. Their firm hands have ensured that the six essays on an elusive subject have told their stories equally well.

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***Reforming Thai Politics*. Edited by Duncan McCargo**. Copenhagen, Denmark: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS), 2002. Softcover: 291pp.

This is yet another useful book about the post-1997 reform politics in Thailand, a theme that has recently attracted enormous attention among Thai political observers, both in Thailand and abroad. Six years of civil society's struggle to reform Thai politics aiming to establish among other things, better checks and balances in the governance of Thailand culminated in the promulgation of the "People's Constitution" in 1997. Yet the new Constitution — the 16th since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932 — should not be taken as an end-point, but rather as another step in a long road of political development in Thailand.

It is in this context that *Reforming Thai Politics* is worthwhile reading. Duncan McCargo, one of the most prolific Western (*farang*) scholars on Thailand in recent years, should be congratulated for turning into an edited volume the papers presented at the 7th International Conference on Thai Studies, held in Amsterdam in July 1999. By and large, the volume covers sufficiently key aspects of the reform.

The book is divided into three main parts: Part I on the Meanings of Political Reform, discusses the background of the reform. Prawes Wasi, who was one of the key persons — or in fact, one might say, the one who "started it all" — in initiating the reform succinctly recaps the events leading to the reform movement. Although, readers may