

***Revolution, Reform and Regionalism in Southeast Asia: Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.* By Ronald Bruce St John. New York: Routledge, 2006. Hardcover: 282pp.**

The author of the book, Ronald Bruce St John has for a long time been studying and writing on the three countries of the former French Indochina, that is, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. This long-standing interest in the three countries is evident in this book, not only in the choice of geographical focus, that is, the three countries, but also the attention devoted to both the colonial history and in particular to developments from the mid-1970s onwards. Few researchers are better suited to provide this overview than St John, given his past experience. The major strength of the book lies in the information and the analysis of the developments in the three countries from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s. This was a turbulent period for Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam with dramatic changes in both domestic developments and in foreign relations for all three countries. A weakness in the book is the lack of depth in the analysis of the process leading up to membership and of integration into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the 1990s and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The structure of the book is chronological, with the first six chapters focusing on the major periods of economic development in the three countries. Chapter 1 covers the historical background and the developments up to the end of the Second Indochina Conflict in 1975 (pp. 1–19). Chapter 2 deals with the period of socialist transformation in Laos and Vietnam and the period of Party of Democratic Kampuchea (Khmer Rouge) rule in Cambodia, that is, 1975 to early 1979. It also deals with the deep conflicts between Cambodia and Vietnam, and Vietnam and China, respectively (pp. 20–43). Chapter 3 is devoted to the period from late-1979 to the mid-1980s when early reforms were implemented in all three countries, or to use St John's terminology "tentative" reforms (pp. 44–69). Chapter 4 is devoted to the period from the mid-1980s to 1993, the starting point being the official launching of deepened reforms and renovation policies, for example, *doi moi* in Vietnam in 1986. The end date of 1993 seems to be motivated by the end of the United Nations' Peacekeeping Operations in Cambodia (pp. 70–101). Chapter 5 covers the period from mid-1993 up to the Asian financial crisis (AFC) in 1997–98. This period was marked by the process of accession to ASEAN membership and also of normalization of relations between Vietnam and the United States of America (pp. 102–42). Chapter 6 deals with developments since 1998, which in the case of this book corresponds to the period 1998–2004.

It covers developments in both domestic and foreign relations in all three countries (pp. 143–88). Chapter 7 encompasses an analysis of continuity and change in developments in the three countries and in their visions for regional collaboration.

The structure of the book is not straightforward, as it is not based on a given set of criteria. If Chapters 1–6 are taken all together they do deal with a continuous chronological development but that development could have been divided into chapters along other lines than those opted for in the book. To divide the period of the Cambodian Conflict (1979–91) into two periods is not logical from a regional point of view. To use the AFC in 1997–98 as a dividing event between two periods is logical for ASEAN but not from the perspective of expanding the Association since Laos joined in 1997 and Cambodia in 1999. The latter ought to have been the criteria used, not the AFC. In a book dealing with both internal reform and regionalism both factors ought to have been allowed to influence the structure of the book.

As indicated above, the strength of the book is the inclusion of the historical context and also of developments from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s. It gives a comprehensive understanding of the complex political, economic, and strategic factors that have shaped and influenced developments in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. The three countries have experienced long periods of conflict, revolution, and reform — an important fact highlighted in this work. To understand developments today it is important to grasp the earlier experience that has shaped the three countries. Another strength of the book is the extensive use of both primary and secondary sources. A large amount of official documentation from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam has been used alongside interviews with officials. The secondary sources used are relevant and reflect various perspectives and views including extensive use of newspapers.

The main weakness is that a book dealing with regionalism ought to have put more emphasis on that dimension. In this context regionalism should not only be seen in terms of ASEAN and related initiatives but also in relation to attempts to expand collaboration between Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam in the 1980s. The later is not given much attention and is dismissed without deeper analysis (pp. 67–69). The process of rapprochement eventually leading to membership in ASEAN and to continued integration into the Association in the 1990s is not addressed in a comprehensive way in the book. Since the overall process is discussed in only three of the chapters (Chapters 4 to 6), even the empirical developments in the process are not presented in

a coherent way. One tangible explanation for the relative weakness in dealing with the regional integration process is that St John's expertise relates to developments in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam and not to ASEAN and regional cooperation within the ASEAN framework. This could partly have been addressed through the use of more literature on ASEAN and also through a more extensive use of studies dealing with the expansion of ASEAN in the 1990s.

Nevertheless, St John's book is a useful contribution to Southeast Asian studies with particular reference to Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. However, the overall impression is that the book would have benefited from a more thorough approach to one core aspect, namely, regionalism. In conclusion, it can be said that St John's book is recommended reading for the strengths identified above. However, given the shortcomings in this work, and the complexities involved in understanding and analysing regional cooperation in general in Southeast Asia and ASEAN in particular, the book should be consulted in connection with other studies on various aspects of regionalism in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, with respect to developments in the domestic sphere and foreign relations in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam respectively, studies devoted specifically to each of the countries do provide more detailed information and could complement the information and analysis in St John's book.