

***Securing Southeast Asia: The Politics of Security Sector Reform.***  
**By Mark Beeson and Alex J. Bellamy. Oxford: Routledge, 2008.**  
**Hardcover: 218pp.**

This volume, though enlightening, is limited by its narrow regional scope. Beeson and Bellamy focus mainly on Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, and in so doing neglect the study of security sector reform in other Southeast Asian countries. Several of the countries excluded, such as Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam, merit study and discussion even though reform of the security sector in those countries at the moment is even less likely to occur than the four countries discussed.

Singapore's exclusion as a case study is particularly surprising. Although Singapore's security structure does not directly influence its domestic politics, the nexus between its leadership and the country's government deserves to be examined along with why the problems occurring in the four countries have not been seen in Singapore and whether or not the Singaporean system is a model to be emulated. In light of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) detainee Mas Selamat Kastari's escape in Singapore, who at the time of writing was still at large, a study of the Singaporean security sector would also be useful in determining whether the country's system of selected or groomed appointments for key security positions is actually working or instead causing weaknesses in Singapore's security.

Despite the book's omissions, the four countries it examines are mostly well covered, with one or two oversights. For example, the authors' analysis of Malaysia focuses on the police as being the organization in need of reform, yet they overlook the role of the military's Defence Intelligence Staff Division (DISD). The DISD serves as the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) intelligence service (though largely run by Army intelligence officers) and is almost semi-autonomous in the structure of the armed forces, being under the control of the Chief of the Armed Forces while at the same time directly reporting to the Minister and National Security Division. Because the MAF has a duty to assist in internal security, DISD has also been drawn into domestic intelligence gathering, not only in the border regions but also in regard to political demonstrations in Kuala Lumpur. Most circles argue that DISD has better intelligence on the borders than the police and that the recent internal infighting within the Royal Malaysian Police is likely to lead the government to consider DISD as a more reliable intelligence gathering agency with potential implications for the MAF.

Opinion is mixed on this as some feel that DISD should focus only on military intelligence while others argue that the MAF needs to gather domestic intelligence because of its internal security role.

It is interesting to note that the problems in the security sector of Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines as illustrated in the book are largely due to the actions taken by three leaders who ruled these countries for an extended period of time: Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad of Malaysia, President Soeharto of Indonesia and President Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines. All three shaped and institutionalized the security sectors of their respective countries for their own domestic ends, and as a result, the problems faced today in the security sector are legacies of their rule. Overcoming such institutionalized and entrenched interests is no easy task.

The four country case studies reveal the difficulties of achieving security and national reform. The authors cite South America and Africa as areas where reform has occurred, but the fundamental fact remains that such reforms occurred there after much violence and bloodshed and when the population no longer feared the security sector. The fact is that the security structure in many countries depends on an aura of inviolability and invincibility which deters the populace from challenging it. Only when this aura is shattered can the security sector be reformed. The Argentine Junta killed an estimated 30,000 people in their prosecution of the 'Dirty War' from 1976–81, yet no uprising by the populace occurred. Following the military's abysmal defeat in the Falklands War, however, the junta was forced out by the people.

Another point of contention is the authors' emphasis on external pressure as an agent of reform. I am of the opinion that external pressure benefits leaders seeking to avoid reform. These leaders are able to cite foreign interference or meddling in order to buttress their positions, a common tactic employed by some ASEAN governments to suppress criticism. In any case, the withholding of support by Western nations in return for reforms today would easily be undermined by countries such as China which would be more than happy to fill any vacuum.

The goal of books such as these is to highlight issues, offer food for thought and stir up discussion; the authors should therefore be commended for doing just that, even though one may not agree with all their findings and conclusions.

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