



THE RISING ASIA REVIEW OF BOOKS

REVIEW BY VINOD KUMAR PILLAI
Independent Scholar

SOUTHEAST ASIANS TRYING TO SPEAK UP In Multiple Voices, They Seek Change

Lina Knorr, Andrea Fleschenberg, Sumrin Kalia, and Claudia Derichs, editors, *Local Responses to Global Challenges in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2023), 452 pages, USD148.

At this stage in world history, the future looks more uncertain than ever and the trajectory here on can be plotted in various ways. The latest World Development Report 2024 of the World Bank, released on August 1, 2024, says that two decades into the twenty-first century, the world is at a historic crossroads. It sees foreign trade and investment in danger of becoming constricted by geopolitical tensions, and the room for governments to act shrinking because of rising populism and public debt. It foresees weaker economic growth in the remainder of this decade than it was in the last two. Middle-income countries, thus, are growing into shrinking spaces with the retrenchment of globalization, difficulties in servicing debt, and the economic and financial costs of climate change and climate action.¹

It is difficult to speculate where the balance of power would lie in the future, in view of the retrenchment of globalization, the possible retreat and decline of the United States in its role as a global policeman, and concerted efforts of an aspirational China to take on a larger global role. Particularly because there are question marks over the acceptability of China as a global power, the problems with its economy, slowing growth rate, and worsening demographics. In this complex scenario, Southeast Asia has to negotiate its way forward, managing these complexities.

One analyst has argued that “the isolation of one superpower and the economic collapse of the other may seem too doom-laden, too apocalyptic . . . What would be Southeast Asia’s future if, from now until 2050, America gradually retreats from the world and China’s economy gradually collapses?” It is thought that the worst possible scenario would be an America in retreat. This is because “globalization—the safe and cheap transport of goods mainly by sea, which accounts for 90 percent of world trade—doesn’t survive without an American security guarantee.”² Yet, Southeast Asian nations cannot overlook the looming presence of China on account of geographical proximity and trade dealings.

In this kind of an uncertain scenario, it would be useful to take stock of local responses within Southeast Asian countries to the global problems of today. The volume under review *Local Responses to Global Challenges in Southeast Asia* is a collection of multi-disciplinary essays

¹ “World Development Report 2024 - The Middle Income Trap,” A World Bank Group Flagship Report, page 69, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/8f49fae8-ba60-45ba-b4d9-82bc22a964d9/content>

² David Hutt, “Southeast Asia’s Uncertain Global Outlook,” *The Diplomat*, March 13, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/03/southeast-asias-uncertain-global-outlook/>



based on papers presented at EuroSEAS 2019, an academic conference on South East Asian Studies in Europe, hosted by Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. With over 700 participants it was the largest gathering in the field of Southeast Asian studies.³ The editors of this book have contributed an elaborate essay that serves as an introduction.

There are in all 17 chapters organized in five sections that focus on separate themes: (1) Critical Takes on Knowledge Production(s); (2) Building and Re-Imagining Communities; (3) Of Power, Authority and (Neo) Populisms; (4) Negotiating Resources & Sustainability; and (5) On the Move—Labour, Livelihoods, Mobilities.

1. The Shift of the Production of Knowledge from West to East

The first section, “Critical Takes on Knowledge Production(s),” starts with an introductory essay by Boeke Rehbein, Professor for the Sociology of Asia and Africa at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin who asserts that knowledge production was, and continues to be, the preserve of the West, driven largely by European domination in the nineteenth century and U.S. domination in the twentieth. Western institutions and knowledge created in these centres alone enjoy credibility and Western theories provide the framework for all academic discourse.

Yet the fact is that the last decade has seen a return to a multi-centric world with a tilt towards Asia, signalling a return to what the global structure was before the eighteenth century. In spite of this visible change, knowledge production continues to be driven by Western

³ The book is edited by Lina Knorr, Research Associate and Lecturer, Institute for Asian and African Studies, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany; Andrea Fleschenberg, Associate Professor, Institute for Asian and African Studies, Universität zu Berlin; Sumrin Kalia, Post-doctoral Research Fellow, University College, London; and Claudia Derichs, Professor of Transregional Southeast Asian Studies, Institute for Asian and African Studies, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany.

constructs be it in the technical or social sciences. This Western-oriented bias is not only out of sync with current realities, it also limits thought and prompts us to view everything in terms of a binary structure of good and bad, strong and weak, true and false. To remedy this situation, and “to do justice to the multi-centric world, the binary vision has to be replaced by one that acknowledges the singular character of each locality as well as the links between localities and the almost all-encompassing global level” (p. 5). This would incorporate the local perspectives that were excluded by Western theories.

The first essay in this section titled “They Dare to Speak: Uncovering Women’s Hidden Agency” seeks to liberate the normally undermined voices of women in knowledge production, especially in the Global South.⁴ The essay details the narratives of the women’s movements in two Indonesian villages, using post-colonial feminist ethnographic methods. In Pal 8 village the women’s movement focused on the conservation of forest cover and gaining the right to forest management in the nearby Kerinci Seblat National Park. In Praikaroku Jangga village, the women’s movement was engaged in fighting against gold mining that was polluting their water and land. The essay goes on to describe the three ethnographic methods used—diorama, field-talk, and drawing in great detail. The assumption was that subaltern groups express their interests when they find conducive space made available by mediators. In such circumstances, they share freely their vulnerabilities and perspectives.

The authors assert that “from the field work in both villages, the research finds out that subaltern women’s groups have used many

⁴ The chapter is authored by Titiek Kartika Hendrastiti, Department of Public Administration, University of Bengkulu, Indonesia; and Siti Kusujarti, Professor of Sociology, Warren Wilson College, Asheville, North Carolina.



concepts and knowledge related to the environment, ecosystem, climate change, conservation, and natural resource governance” (pp. 28–29).

The second essay in this section, “Félix Resurrección Hidalgo’s *The Church against the State: Conspiracy, Controversy, and Censorship in Colonial and Contemporary Philippines*” (by Pearlie Rose S. Baluyut, Professor of Art History, Imperial Valley College, California), examines the history of Felix Resurrección Hidalgo’s painting “*The Church against the State*” (circa 1904) that depicts the Spanish Governor-General Manuel de Bustillo Bustamante’s assassination in 1719 in Manila, Philippines. Hidalgo soon changed the title to “*The Assassination of Governor Bustamante*” and exhibited the painting at the St. Louis World’s Fair in 1904. Fearing controversy and to preserve his ties with the Church, he hid the painting in his atelier in Paris, because of which the painting remained in obscurity in the hands of his heir.

The painting was rediscovered and changed hands in November 2003 when it was donated to the National Museum of the Philippines in Manila, and the title was changed to “*The Tragedy of Governor Bustamante*” to disassociate the Church from the crime. The National Museum of the Philippines initiated conservation measures after which, to mark the painter’s death anniversary, the author of this essay was tasked to write “*Art Historical Notes on the Painting.*” In this note the author drew attention to the conditional deed of donation executed by the donor of the painting and its implications. This was deleted by the National Museum from the notes when it was published in 2013. This essay details the background, the painting history, and an analysis of the artwork, drawing on the author’s historical notes. The author draws attention to the manner in which the State, the Church, the Philippine elite, and the National Museum, either directly or indirectly influenced the painting at various stages to further their own interests and, in the

process, stifled free artistic expression. The essay provides a critical examination of “how individual and institutional power manifests itself and how it moves across time and space based on close readings of archival data and anecdotes, analysis of artworks using standard art historical methodologies and critical theory from formalism to semiotics, and embodied research experience” (p. 35).

The third essay in this section, “The Elephant in the Room: China’s Soft Power Outreach in Academia, Its Impact on Asian Studies, and What This Means for Southeast Asia Scholars” is by Robert Shepherd, visiting Associate Professor of international affairs at George Washington University, who is also the editor of *Critical Asian Studies*, formerly the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, founded in 1968 by U.S.-based scholars critical of the American war in Vietnam. This essay examines the growing perception that pan-Asian organizations have a greater representation of China-related themes and how this will impact the future. The author points out that many commentators in the west have written about China’s state-funded global network of Confucius Institutes, claiming erroneously that the Chinese government’s goal is to take advantage of the academic freedom on American campuses in order to instil a pro-China viewpoint in the minds of future leaders. The author insists that there is not much evidence to support these claims and goes on to point out that in practice, Chinese Communism was hollowed out long back and the present Chinese Communist Party is focused on strident Chinese nationalism with rigid social conservatism.

The Confucius Institutes, moreover, do not get much support on foreign university campuses dominated by leftists and progressives, and therefore the red-scare hysteria is misplaced. In fact, the Korea Foundation, the Japan Foundation and Taiwan’s Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation also provide financial support to foreign universities but this



is never criticized. The author finally explains with relevant figures, how the submissions and acceptance rate for papers related to Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan in key journals was much lower than the non-China related papers, although overall the acceptance rate of papers submitted to reputed journals have plummeted to around 10 percent or less. He ends the essay with the advice: “for Southeast Asian research to have greater standing in the field of Asian Studies, scholars writing about the region, whether indigenous or foreign, need to show readers why what they say is important.”

The last essay in this section, “Academic Freedom in Southeast Asia” (by Sriprapha Petcharamesree, senior faculty member at the Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University in Thailand), points out that academic freedom has three aspects—individual rights for staff and students to study, teach, express, and publish freely; institutional autonomy for the academy/university; and respect for and protection of academic freedom by public authorities. She asserts that both institutions and individuals in Southeast Asian countries face challenges on account of shrinking democratic space. This essay, a critical examination of academic freedom in Southeast Asia, relies mainly on scholarly articles, papers, and other relevant documents. The author states that in order to add value and originality, primary data was also drawn from research commissioned by the Strengthening Human Rights and Peace Research and Education in ASEAN/SEA (SHAPE-SEA), published in August 2019 (p. 71). This analysis of human rights and peace education in ASEAN/Southeast Asia was conducted by a team of eleven researchers/academics in the region who examined the state of human rights and peace education and research at higher education institutions. The study identifies several factors that affect academic freedom, like the existence of the controlling authorities

in the Philippines and Singapore, whose prior approval is required before academics can exercise the freedom granted to them.

The author, Petcharamesree, states that in the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) determines what courses should be included in the General Education Curriculum in Higher Education. Petcharamesree quotes an article in the *Manila Bulletin* stating that “Colleges in the Philippines do not independently decide curriculum content. What gets taught is not only decided by the government, but in an indirect way, by business interests as well” (p. 76; Jejomar 2019).⁵ It is true that academics in the Philippines as well as Singapore enjoy a high level of freedom to express ideas when compared to other authoritarian regimes. Yet, the “controlling authorities must first give approval to some of these processes. For example, curriculum content development and programme awards must be approved by supervising ministries, namely the Ministry of Education” (Ibid). Further, Petcharamesree quotes Moxoma and Hayden as saying that “in other cases, where university administration is highly centralised such as in Brunei, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam, this control is even tighter” (Moxoma and Hayden 2018, 18; Also see, Ngo 2019; Reuters 2019; and Salmi and Ly 2019).⁶

⁵ Binay Jejomar, “Academic Freedom,” *Manila Bulletin*, August 21, 2019, <https://news.mb.com.ph/2019/08/21/academic-freedom>

⁶ Nanludet Moxoma and Martin Hayden, “The Culture of Institutional Governance at a University in Laos: An Ethnographic Exploration,” *Journal of International and Comparative Education* 7, no. 1 (2018): 35-48; Huong Thi Minh Ngo, “Opportunities and Constraints on Human Rights Education when Academic Freedom is Not Guaranteed: The Case of Vietnam,” *Human Rights Education Review* 2, no. 2 (2019): 7-25; Reuters, “Vietnam Communist Party Expels Academic over Facebook Posts, March 8, 2019, www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-security-academic/vietnam-communist-party-expels-academic-over-facebook-posts-idUSKCNIQPoS7; and Jamil Salmi and Ly Thi Pham, “Academic Governance and Leadership in Vietnam: Trends and



Similarly, contentious/forbidden issues are another factor. The author, Petcharamesree, states, “In countries such as Malaysia, some issues are considered contentious such as homosexuality, the elimination of child marriage, repeal of the anti-sedition and fake news laws, review of anti-terrorism laws, provision of access to formal education to all children regardless of status, and the death penalty” (p. 83). Commercialization of education is yet another factor. Because of these and a few other factors, the study concludes that in Southeast Asia “academics have had to pay a high price for exercising their academic freedom” (p. 85).

The essays in this section are all about knowledge production being over-reliant on Western theories and constructs and the need to move to a more dispersed process of knowledge production in sync with the shift to a more multi-centric world. This is a pertinent issue that has been studied by a number of scholars. Ted Sun, Chief Innovations Officer at Transcontinental Institution of Higher Education, Malta, says, “In social sciences, using theories from other nations is like wearing shoes that don’t fit the individual or the purpose. This lack of fit occurs for the individual due to a misalignment of cultural values; furthermore, the lack of fit also occurs for a business environment that is drastically different from the theory’s original environment.”⁷ The essays in this section present interesting examples that support the central idea, but one of them treads on thin ice, “The Elephant in the Room: China’s Soft Power Outreach in Academia” arguing that the commonly held view (in

Challenges, *Journal of International and Comparative Education* 8, no. 22 (2019): 103-118.

⁷ Ted Sun, “The Problem with Applying Western Theories that Don’t Fit,” University World News, March 15, 2019, <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20190312130941220>

the West) regarding the Confucius Institutes and the overwhelming influence of China is factually incorrect. Not everybody would agree. In any case, going by the past record, the incoming Trump Presidency in 2025 may not bode well for the Confucius Institutes in the United States. Si-yuan Li and Kenneth King, in their article “The Rise, Decline and Possible Resurrection of China’s Confucius Institutes,” say that “Under the Trump administration (2017-2021), this scrutiny dramatically intensified, resulting in a wave of Confucius Institute closures across the United States.”⁸

2. Building Community at Home and Abroad

The second section, “Building and Re-Imagining Communities,” begins with an introduction by Ferdiansyah Thajib, Postdoctoral Fellow at Leipzig Lab, Leipzig University who explains that the meaning of community has undergone many changes from the classical understanding of a stable, distinctive, homogenous group. Especially during the last decades of the twentieth century, the concept of community has evolved along two strands—“one that emphasises territorially grounded ways of relating, local emplacement, and face-to-face interaction, and the other, which relies on more abstract, symbolic, and affectively mediated social qualities” (p. 91). The three chapters in this section look at the diverse understandings on reimagining communities in Southeast Asia.

The first essay in this section, “Indonesian Islamic Academia as a Transregional Political Actor: Understanding Global Agency Through Local History” (authored by Amanda tho Seeth, acting chair of

⁸ Si-yuan Li and Kenneth King, “The Rise, Decline, and Possible Resurrection of China’s Confucius Institutes,” *The Diplomat*, August 24, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/08/the-rise-decline-and-possible-resurrection-of-chinas-confucius-institutes/>



Transregional Southeast Asian Studies at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany), examines the evolution of Indonesian Islamic academia from being confined to domestic political affairs to a much larger border-crossing global role to serve the foreign policy agenda of the state. This transregional phenomenon is explained by tracing history and forms of capital as suggested by the sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (p. 102).

It was during the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia (1942-45) that organized forms of Islamic higher education were developed. The Japanese established the first official public Islamic University in Jakarta in 1945. Later on, during the term of Indonesia's first President, Sukarno (1945-1967), the institutionalization of Islamic academia as a political actor picked up pace. President Suharto (in power from 1967-1998), involved the state Islamic academia in furthering his national development agenda that focused on the capitalist model of growth and western modernity. It was during his time that the transregional outlook was built and developed.

Very recently, Islamic academics supported by the state, are advocating for Indonesia as the new centre of the Ummah (global Islamic community) and maneuvering Indonesia from a peripheral position in the Muslim world to a central role as a promoter of a more moderate Islam that is acceptable to the West. The author details the historic developments over the years and concludes that "the Indonesian state's rationale to add Islamic academia as an actor into its foreign policy agenda can be understood as a logical consequence, even as a path-dependent result, of past political decisions" (p. 113).

The second essay in this section, "A Space in a Foreign Land: The Sociabilities of Emplacement of Vietnamese Labour Migrants in Taiwan" (by Jessica Steinman, PhD researcher, Institute for Anthropology,

University of Leipzig), discusses the results of a study conducted on Facebook groups of Vietnamese migrants in Taiwan, to make sense of the digital sociability of emplacement. The Vietnamese are the second largest migrant population in Taiwan (29 percent), just behind Indonesians who constitute 31.4 percent of migrants to that country. The Vietnamese have been moving to Taiwan in large numbers because Taiwan is believed to offer plenty of job opportunities. But after landing in Taiwan, because of the long working hours, lack of language skills, isolated living arrangements and other problems, many Vietnamese workers break their contracts to find illegal work in countries which have labor agreements with Taiwan.

But again, most of them are low-skilled rural workers with limited understanding of the laws and culture of the host countries, and are reluctant to participate in social activities in the host countries. Facebook groups are the only option for them to share their problems and search for solutions. The author goes on to analyze the nature of problems faced by migrants with specific examples, and finally concludes that Social Networking Services (SNSs) play a great role in helping migrants to negotiate their identity and integrate into the host society. This being an exploratory attempt, she accepts that “. . . much more research is needed, especially those that can combine digital sociabilities with offline formats of sociability to create a full picture of the phenomenon” (p. 132).

The third and last chapter in this section, “Nationalism and Two Sexual Moral Panics in Indonesia,” by Saskia Eleonora Wieringa, Emerita Professor, University of Amsterdam, looks at two campaigns that made use of the social movement, “sexual moral panic,” for political purposes, significantly impacting human rights in Indonesia. According to sociologist Stanley Cohen, a moral panic is a social movement against an



exaggerated or fabricated threat from individuals or groups believed to undermine the safety and security of society (2011). “Moral panics of sexuality specifically focus on fear and anxiety around certain sexual practices and identities that go against social norms and accepted moral belief.”⁹

The first campaign centered on an event on the night of October 1, 1965 when it was reported that six generals had been abducted by 14 to 16-year-old girls belonging to the communist-affiliated women’s organization, Gerwani (Gerakan Wanita Indonesia) or Indonesian Women’s Movement, and while three were immediately castrated and killed, the remaining three were taken to a field near an Air Force base and shot dead. General Suharto, who had prior information of the event, crushed what the army termed a communist coup, and followed it up with a massive genocide of over 500,000 people and imprisonment of thousands. Within a year, Suharto ousted President Sukarno from power. Through the media which he controlled, reports were put out blaming the Communist Party of Indonesia (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI) for masterminding the abduction and killing of the generals. There were also reports of the girls who were involved in the abduction luring the generals with naked dances and about the sexual perversions prevalent within the party ranks. The propaganda unleashed an anti-communist campaign, incited Muslims and other conservative sections to hatred, and mass killings that enabled Suharto to continue in power.

A second similar sexual moral panic ran from late-2015 when a homophobic campaign was launched by political and religious elites following a wave of anti-LGBT reports in the media and statements by

⁹ Michael Karger, “Moral Panics of Sexuality,” September 2022, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/363923323_Moral_Panics_of_Sexuality

politicians that depicted the LGBT community as a group that did not belong to the nation. From late-2019, efforts to criminalize the LGBT community focused on the need to revise the Criminal Code. While discussions are continuing, the outcome is unclear. The author concludes that “the threat of being criminalised hangs over the heads of the LGBT community, while those associated with communism cannot hope to have the stigma lifted anytime soon. So far conservative forces that define these two groups as the abjected others of the pure Muslim nation have the strongest cards” (p. 152).

Section 2 seeks to illustrate transregional influences working to reimagine communities in the modern world. The essays look at community building in different contexts. The transregional aspect is in sharp focus in the first two essays. The first essay discusses the role of academia in promoting Indonesia’s interests abroad as a face of moderate Islam, and thereby serving the foreign policy agenda of the state. Other scholars too have observed this phenomenon and commented on it. Amanda tho Seeth in her article, “Indonesia’s Islamic Diplomacy,” argues that “Indonesia, the world’s largest Muslim-majority nation, is continuously increasing its Islamic diplomacy portfolio.¹⁰ A central element herein is the deployment of a moderate Islam discourse for global peace. In doing so, the country seeks to weaken Arab dominance within Islamic discourse and rebrand itself as a progressive role model for the Islamic world. The moderate Islam agenda for peace is characterized by the collaboration of state- and non-state actors at the domestic and international level—despite their diverse understandings of what “moderate Islam” is.” The second essay deals

¹⁰ Amanda tho Seeth, “Indonesia’s Islamic Diplomacy: Crafting a role model for moderate Islam,” GIGA Focus (German Institute for Area Studies), no. 2: 2023, <https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/giga-focus/indonesia-s-islamic-peace-diplomacy-crafting-role-model-for-moderate-islam>



with the manner in which Vietnamese migrant labor cope with the challenges they faced in Taiwan, and the critical role of social media in this regard. The nature of problems and possible coping strategies will resonate with those of migrant labor elsewhere too.

3. Where Strongmen are Dressed as Democrats

The third section, “Of Power, Authority and (Neo) Populisms,” begins with an introductory essay by Norma Osterberg-Kaufmann (Senior Lecturer, Social Science Department, Humboldt University, Berlin), who explains that unlike other regions of the world, Southeast Asia has resisted the changes brought about by democratization, but offers good scope for studying authoritarian politics. As the autocracies are sophisticated, they derive the full benefit of authoritarian politics while appearing to be like democracies. Similarly, populism in Southeast Asia is difficult to categorize as belonging to the European kind of right-wing populism or the Latin American kind of left-wing populism. The three essays in this section pick up the various strands of the debate centering around the question of power distribution and populism, and examine the authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia. What remains is the question of where they are heading, and what can be expected—continuities, ruptures, or a renewed optimism for democracy. “Or will the Southeast Asian laboratory produce new role models and inspire other regimes with its sophisticated good governance autocracy?” (p. 167).

The first essay in this section, “Southeast Asian Artists and Academics Unsettling Borders, Power, and Authority through Collaborative Works,” explains how artists, activists and academics in Southeast Asian countries and the diaspora collaborate as they deal with

various political and social issues in some of the countries in the region.¹¹ The essay is structured in an interesting way—the authors call it a “quilting framework”—with short essays within the essay where individual artists, activists and academics write short, first person accounts about the specific issues they dealt with in the countries they were working in. Their stories show the use of various art forms—photographic images, films, songs, poetry or performance arts, all based on the findings of solid academic research—that are employed to respond to local challenges by repressive regimes in Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia. The challenges, shortfalls and achievements are discussed as well as the benefits flowing from the collaboration in projecting these issues to the outside world. The authors finally conclude that “despite the challenges, the collaborative works we discussed earlier have a multiplier effect, through our forging of alliance and collective work between individuals, groups, disciplines, localities and regions” (p. 189).

The next essay, “The Strongmen Strike Back? Anti-Geopolitics and Southeast Asia’s Authoritarian (Re)turns,” by Sabina Lawreniuk, Research Fellow, School of Geography, University of Nottingham, provides a detailed analysis of the authoritarian trends in Cambodia during the last decade. The hopes generated after the Paris Peace Accord of 1991 for a return to democracy were soon belied. But the last decade under Prime Minister Hun Sen and his Cambodian People’s Party’s rule worsened the state of democracy in his country. Although it may be

¹¹ This chapter is authored by Rosa Cordillera A. Castillo, Anthropologist, Institute for Asian and African Studies, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany; Kay Abañó, Filipina artist based in Berlin; Bui Kim Đình, researcher and independent curator, Hanoi and Berlin; Henry Tan, artist, Bangkok; Ferdiansyah Thajib, Postdoctoral Fellow, Leipzig Lab, Leipzig University, Germany; and Clod Marlan Krister Yambao, Fellow and PhD candidate in political science, Department of Conflict and Development Studies, University of Ghent.



seemingly in line with the illiberal trends seen in many countries, this essay looks at Cambodia in isolation to understand how a general strike by garment workers in January 2014 triggered significant changes. The Royal Government of Cambodia decided to crackdown on the peaceful protest and the resistance provoked the beginning of a long-drawn offensive, and a descent into outright dictatorship.

Instead of a top-down study, the author did a ground-up analysis by interviewing executives and grassroots' level members of four garment sector trade unions, and also referenced news reports and policymakers' reports. The study reveals that the strongarm methods adopted by the state indicates their weakness and inability to address the legitimate concerns of the workers. These concerns arise mainly from the state's inability to ensure a fair redistribution of wealth flowing from the economic growth of the past two decades. The international condemnation and penalties by the European Union and the United States further eroded the growth prospects for the economy.

The author concludes that “rather than an extension of sovereign power from above, adapted in a top-down fashion by autocratic emulation or diffusion by the state's elite (cf. Morganbesser 2020), the crackdown represents a political transition provoked and shaped by the force of these workers and other actors from below.” The author adds, “The strike back of the strongman then not an offensive blow but a defensive manoeuvre, and one which reveals an otherwise brittle hold on power” (p. 208).

The third essay in this section, “A Matrilineal Society's Influence on Women's Political Access(ibility)—The Minangkabau Women Missing in Indonesian Politics” (by Lina Knorr, Research Associate and Lecturer, Institute for Asian and African Studies, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin), explains that during the last century, and particularly during



the last two decades, patriarchy has attracted widespread criticism as well as academic attention and study. The search for solutions involves the study of matriarchy as a possible antidote. This chapter presents the findings of a study of the Minangkabau women in West Sumatra, Indonesia who form the largest matriarchal system in the world. The women are the sole inheritors of their clan assets and continue in the clan even after marriage, with married couples living with the wife's kin. This may seem to provide the women a powerful position, although their society is egalitarian and consensus-oriented.

The objective of the present study was to establish whether the social structure enables Minangkabau women to become elected politicians, and what the impediments are. The study involved a series of interviews from the grassroots up, using a snowball technique in which interviewees suggest names from their community for further interviews. The study incorporated news reports and information from other sources.

This chapter explains that although their society is matriarchal, when it comes to their political participation, it will have to be appreciated that their lives are structured around three pillars—first, *adat* (which refers to the beliefs, norms, law, morality, etiquette, art, ceremonies, etc.); second, Islam; and third, an androcentric political system. Crucial decisions are always taken, keeping in mind *adat*, Islam, and the reality of an androcentric political system. The separation of tasks prescribed for men and women according to *adat* would lead voters to believe that women do not have the time to take up political responsibilities. The author concludes: “it should be clear by now that Minangkabau's matrilineal system should not be seen as a solution to ending patriarchal domination in the world, as some matriarchal scholars hoped it would be” (p. 232).



The fourth essay, “Securitisation as Response to Disinformation: The Cases of Singapore and Malaysia,” by Ric Neo, PhD scholar in Political Science, University of Hong Kong, looks at the manner in which the state in Singapore and Malaysia responded to disinformation by securitisation. The analysis is based on the securitisation theory framework developed by the Copenhagen School, which states that “political issues are presented as emergencies to be handled as a matter of priority when they are framed as menacing and an existential emergency by an actor with institutional clout” (p. 242). The state flags disinformation—be it for political gain or financial gain—and responds by presenting it as an emergency that requires immediate take-down without waiting for the due process.

While this has worked well in liberal democracies in the west, the same cannot be assumed for autocracies or non-liberal democracies in the rest of the world because audience acceptance and credibility of the state are critical. This study applies the securitisation theory outside of the west by looking at two Southeast Asian countries, Singapore and Malaysia. What emerges from the study is that Singaporean authorities handled and communicated properly to stakeholders in 2018 to ensure audience acceptance of the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill which enabled the government to introduce the necessary laws to check disinformation on May 8, 2019. Citizens accepted the reduced liberties as a price to ensure economic stability and growth as a social compact.

In Malaysia, it was totally different. The government suggested that fake news could adversely affect the democratic integrity, sovereignty, social harmony and state of the economy. Legislation was introduced in March 2018 to give the police sweeping powers to take action. Although the bill was passed, the overall handling and



communication to the stakeholders by a government that was facing corruption scandals, resulted in the bill being challenged and eventually repealed in less than two years' time. The author concludes that "the Singaporean and Malaysian governments have consciously pursued securitisation as a response to disinformation, leading to outcomes including the consolidation of political power, an increase in regulatory oversight online and the further censoring of dissent" (p. 258).

The fifth and last essay in this section, "Dilemmas of Labour and Populism in Indonesia," by Olle Törnquist, Professor of Politics and Development, University of Oslo, argues that a robust labor movement is expected to promote inclusive development. But while this is true for the Global North, the conditions in the South are quite different. The working class movement is not as unified and the quality of democracy and development are not at the same level.

This essay looks at the political dynamics in Indonesia from the 2010s onwards, examining the groupings and power shifts that influenced the elections during this entire period. It is clear that ordinary people and workers find it difficult to gain representation and ensure that their concerns are addressed in a form of true participatory governance. The working class movement is also not a unified one and the informal sector is generally excluded. The established elites and special interest groups support public welfare schemes and populist measures only to contain social unrest and win elections while market-driven growth is promoted.

One notable exception was the public health reform introduced during Megawati Sukarnoputri's presidency (2001-2004) that turned out to be an example of democratic representation, supported as it was by a joint action group of various politicians, unions, and civil society groups. But this could not be extended to other areas. The author concludes that



this can be done by “better democratic representation of popular-rooted organisations for crucial issues and interests in public governance, combined with transformative reforms based on equal rights that movements and groups can agree on and support.”

The five essays in this section hover around the distribution/concentration of power, and autocratic tendencies and populism, in the context of six countries: Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, Cambodia, Singapore, and Malaysia. While all the essays examine the dynamics of political power, the first and third essays are particularly interesting. The first essay looks at how artists of all kinds collaborated with activists and academics to formulate creative responses to the repressive regimes in Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia. Their coming together, pooling resources and joining up with activists makes this a unique way of dealing with a repressive regime.

The third essay looks at the Minangkabau women in West Sumatra, Indonesia as they are the largest matrilineal system in the world. India, too, has the Khasis in Meghalaya and the Garos in Assam, that are still matrilineal societies. The Nairs and Ezhavas in Kerala, and the Bunts and Bilavas in Karnataka are also examples of what were once matrilineal societies, now in varying states of decline after Independence.

Various studies have shown that the matrilineal system in Minangkabau society has in no way dented the grip of patriarchy in their society. Tengku Rika Valentina and Cici Savitri write in their paper “Minang Women in the Cultural Patriarchy Maelstrom” that “women in Minang customs have experienced degradation. Their success in holding heirlooms, is only a symbol,” because the management of property is controlled by Bundo Kandung, who are the elder, married women holding community decision-making roles. So, the Minang women only



possess, not control, in line with the expression ‘women reign but do not rule.’ The degradation is caused by the current globalization and capitalism which makes Minang women’s position precarious.¹²

4. The Politics of Negotiating Resources

This brings us to Section 4, “Negotiating Resources & Sustainability,” which begins with an introductory essay by Sumrin Kalia, post-doctoral Research Fellow, University College, London. The author argues that since Southeast Asia is a highly resource rich region, the effective management of resources is critical for the stability and development of the region. This may involve cross-border issues with other countries, as is the case with the Mekong River which originates in Tibet, China and flows through Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam and empties into the South China Sea. In any case, Southeast Asia also has to deal with the reality of being sandwiched between India and China as well as the U.S. interest in maintaining open sea lanes through the Straits of Malacca. The long-term sustainability of resources and the impact on the environment are also important factors to be considered. This section has two chapters that present examples of inefficiencies in management of resources, one in the case of Myanmar and the other pertaining to palm oil plantations in Indonesia.

The first essay in this section, “Living Off the Resource Curse in Myanmar” (by Khin Zaw Win, Director, Tampadipa Institute, Yangon), written prior to the military coup of February 2021, laments that Myanmar is included in the list of Least Developed Countries of the United Nations since 1987, even though it has abundant natural

¹² Tengku Rika Valentina and Cici Savitri, “Minang Women in the Cultural Patriarchy Maelstrom: Viewed from the View of Religion and Culture,” Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on Gender, Culture and Society, ICGCS 2021, August 30-31, 2021, Padang, Indonesia, European Digital Library, <https://eudl.eu/pdf/10.4108/eai.30-8-2021.2316280>



resources. The reason for this is the poor management of natural resources. Myanmar has more water per capita than all surrounding countries, and all the water resources are within its national borders.

It also has vast potential in natural gas as well as other mineral resources including copper, gold, jade, marble, nickel, tin, tungsten, and zinc. But the mining sector has been neglected except for jade mining which constitutes a good proportion of the economy. Natural gas exports, construction and service industries are the other important constituents. Agriculture, including forests and fisheries, employs much of the rural population, but millions of rural workers have migrated to neighboring countries.

The debilitated condition of democracy results in brief periods of hope followed by military coups which results in poor leadership and governance. The study shows that “the wholesale plunder of natural resources, their misuse and diversion are a fact that the country has had to live with for decades” (p. 313).

In the second and last essay in this section, “Oil Palm Plantation Expansion and Frontier-Making in Papua, Indonesia,” the authors argue that “frontier making” is the process of converting peripheral land, usually forested or barren and scarcely populated areas into zones of economic development, with the active involvement of the state in legalizing the arrangements.¹³ This is usually coupled with “territorialization,” which means the formulation of new regulations and setting up of regulatory authorities to regulate the people and resources. This chapter looks at frontier making in southern Papua, Indonesia,

¹³ This chapter is authored by Nanang Indra Kurniawan, Lecturer, Department of Politics and Government, Universitas Gadjah Mada; Indah Surya Wardhani, Researcher, Department of Politics and Government, Universitas Gadjah Mada; and Muhammad Djindan, Lecturer, Department of Politics and Government, Universitas Gadjah Mada.



specifically the expansion of oil palm plantations in Papua under the Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate (MIFEE) project in 2010.

Frontier-making in Papua began much earlier, in 1967, to exploit the large deposits of copper and gold in the area. It was developed as a resource frontier so that natural resources could be exploited by domestic and international companies with the backing of the military. The MIFEE project was launched with the backing of domestic and foreign investors so that food and energy security could be ensured. Also, the development program could have been a strategy to tackle the separatist tendencies prevalent in Papua.

But as it played out, the project brought to the fore various issues related to dispossession of land by the involvement of the military, as well as strong resistance by local communities, resulting in civil society organizations in Merauke and their national and international networks taking up the cause. MIFEE did not ultimately continue as a project but laid the foundation for similar projects to be taken up in future.

This study demonstrates how the palm oil project expansion that aimed to commodify nature involved the intersection of various actors at the local, national, and global level, as well as land and other resources. Frontier-making is, therefore, not a linear process but “a complex and multi-scale process which involves political disputes, social differences, and conflicting interests” (p. 331).

Together these two essays in this section illustrate how poor management of natural resources affects stability, retards development, raises environmental concerns and a host of social issues. In the case of Myanmar, the absence of democracy for long periods, is seen as the trigger. In the case of the Oil Palm Plantation project in Papua, Indonesia, it was poor planning and a ham-handed approach involving the military, for something that ought to have been handled sensitively



by involving the various stakeholders. The irony is that history is sort of repeating itself in 2024.

Laila Afifa in her article, “The Problem with Our Food Estate Program,” writes, “The government’s plan to establish a food estate in Merauke Regency, South Papua, is like hearing an old song being played yet again. There are many doubts about the chance of success of the plan to create rice fields and sugarcane plantations on swamps and peatlands, and it may even damage the natural environment.”¹⁴ Interestingly, she points out that in 2010, then President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono had rolled out a similar program (Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate) covering around 1.2 million hectares, which failed to meet its target of self-sufficiency after more than a decade. The foreign and domestic investors then pulled out from the project. So, the government should have learned from the failures of the previous administration. These are insightful essays that offer lessons for other countries as well.

5. The Troubles and Triumphs of Working Abroad

This fifth and last section, “On the Move—Labour, Livelihoods, Mobilities,” begins with an introductory essay (by Gunnar Stange, researcher and lecturer at the Department of Geography and Regional Research, University of Vienna, Austria), who argues that the mobility of labor, the pursuit of livelihood in other countries and the flow of people has challenged the notion of nations as isolated geographic areas and drawn attention to the need for transnational research to make sense of the human condition.

The restrictions brought on by COVID-19 resulted in the confinement of people in their original homes and cities, and in some

¹⁴ Laila Afifa, “The Problem with our Food Estate Program,” Tempo.Co September 24, 2024, <https://en.tempo.co/read/1920403/the-problem-with-our-food-estate-program>

cases left them stranded in faraway places. The consequent effects on the global economy clearly show the necessity and impact of the mobility of labor. The three essays in this section examine the interconnection of people and places and the manner in which migrant labor leverage their social, economic, and cultural capital in their new settings. The studies pertain to female domestic migrant workers from Indonesia working in other countries, as well as Indian and Pakistani women workers in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

The first essay in this section, “Indonesian Women Migrant Workers: Standing in the Midst of Femininity and Masculinity” (by Elisabeth Dewi, Head of International Relations Department, Parahyangan Catholic University, Bandung, Indonesia), looks at the various aspects of Indonesian female domestic migrant workers (FMDW) migrating to other countries to take up domestic worker jobs. To begin with, this is a global phenomenon, as 11.5 million domestic workers (mostly females: 8.5 million) migrated to other countries to take up jobs in 2019. In the case of Indonesia, the remittances that the FMDWs send back home play an important role as a source of external finance for the country and also to supplement the income of the husbands and families back home.

The destination countries have also come to depend on these migrant workers. However, the systems both in Indonesia and the destination countries operate in a patriarchal setup that prioritizes male migrant workers and treats women migrant workers as second-class, resulting in FMDWs being treated as subordinates who have to obey. Also, since their work is considered to be in a private space, there are no norms, rules, and regulations of the kind seen with industrial workers. Their employers often treat the FMDWs as their possession and make unreasonable demands. It is also true that the remittances they send



back home to their families may be used by some husbands to squander on sex with other women or enter into a contract marriage to satisfy their needs.

The study clearly shows that while FMDWs play a significant role in shoring up their families' income and collectively provide foreign remittances for the country, they lead an unregulated work life, oftentimes bereft of fairness and dignity. The author suggests that "it is time for women (and men) to be able to choose and decide which experiences they would like to pursue when migrating. Not as a passive, permissive, and silent victim of the injustices that have occurred so far" (p. 364).

The next essay, "New Brooms and Giant Napkins: Street Protests and the Campaign for an Indonesian Domestic Workers' Law" (by Mary Austin, PhD, School of Oriental and African Studies, and now an independent scholar based in the UK), offers a detailed study of the Indonesian domestic worker movement with an emphasis on the four million of them employed within Indonesia, as well as the street protests launched by the movement that helped it gain visibility, legitimacy, and political strength. Between 2009 and 2015 JALA PRT Jaringan Advokasi Nasional Perlinchungan Pekerja Rumah Tangga (National Network for Domestic Workers' Advocacy) organized rallies to publicise their cause. They used innovative methods that caught the attention and effectively communicated to the local people what they intended to convey. The demonstration on February 16, 2009 had protestors wearing red-checked napkins as headscarves with spotless white t-shirts and aprons. The tropes repeated in subsequent demonstrations. In 2010, they held aloft a love napkin made by stitching together 900 napkins. In 2014 male unionists with scarves on their heads were seen manhandling a giant toilet with an even taller giant broom. Two hunger strikes were

organized, one in November 2014 followed by another in early 2015, after the domestic workers' protection bill, despite promises, disappeared from the list of priority legislation.

These demonstrations and strikes kept the momentum going with some slow progress, but the bill has not as yet been enacted as law. The first draft was in fact submitted by the National Advocacy Network for Domestic Workers (Jala PRT) in 2004 to three political party factions at the House of Representatives. It underwent changes 65 times until March 21, 2023 when the House approved it as a House initiative bill. But since then, the bill has never been included in the House legislative agenda, even though the House Speaker is a woman.

Eva K. Sundari, a board member of ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights and a former member of the House of Representatives, writes in *The Jakarta Post* that “the domestic workers’ protection bill clearly addresses the civil and political rights, as well as the economic and sociocultural rights, of domestic workers. The bill is also certain to benefit the national economy due to the increased productivity of domestic workers as a result of improved workplaces and decent wages.”¹⁵

The last essay in this section and the final chapter of the book, “Becoming Professionals: Virtual Mobility, Gender, and Religious Knowledge,” looks at the intersection of religion, mobility and professionalism in the lives of women.¹⁶ The study was conducted during

¹⁵ Eva K. Sundari, “Long-awaited Domestic Workers Bill Deserves Support, not Obstruction,” *The Jakarta Post*, May 1, 2024, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/opinion/2024/05/01/long-awaited-domestic-workers-bill-deserves-support-not-obstruction.html>

¹⁶ This chapter is authored by Claudia Derichs, Professor of Transregional Southeast Asian Studies, Institute for Asian and African Studies, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany; Faiza Muhammad-Din, Post-doc fellow, The



the COVID-19 pandemic by interviewing twenty women of South Asian origin. Of these, three specific cases were chosen to be presented as case studies in this essay. All three were in their mid-thirties and were graduates with professional training. Madiha was a trained medical doctor from Pakistan living in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia with her husband who was working there. She was serving her community back home through online consultations. Amna, a psychotherapist from Karachi, Pakistan, who was running an online freelance Islamic counseling service. Umm Afraz, a writer, graphic designer, and Quran life coach, who wrote a novel about the lives of South Asian immigrant families in the United Arab Emirates, and was settled in the UAE. She was working as a Quran life coach as a means to spiritual fulfilment.

The author states that “tracing the multifarious mobilities and connectivities between the women, the places that inform their life worlds, as well as the ideas, experiences and skills that build Muslim knowledge communities in and beyond Asia, the three case studies help us to see how female actors understand, define, create and mediate their knowledge of Islam” (p. 405).

In the final section, the dynamics and issues of the diaspora are brought in focus. The problems faced by Indonesian female domestic migrant workers in foreign countries could easily be applied to workers from India as well. The problems faced by Indonesian migrant workers has also been studied by other researchers. Rosita Tandos, Runping Zhu, and Richard Krever in their paper, “The Protection of and Empowerment for Indonesian Female Migrant Domestic Workers,” say that “Migrant female domestic workers are subject to an overarching system of

isolation, subordination, and exploitation due to the intersection of their gender, low education, and foreign-migrant status.”¹⁷ They conclude that the conditions faced by the migrant workers will remain unnoticed in the country where they work, as well as in their home country, unless and until some horrific abuse and suffering surfaces and is taken up by the Press.

To sum up, this is a collection of theoretically grounded, multi-disciplinary essays covering the problems and challenges faced by Southeast Asian countries, and their responses and learnings. That said, more than half the chapters in this volume cover Indonesia while Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Myanmar, and Vietnam are covered in a single or at the most three chapters. Three countries, Brunei, Timor-Leste, and Laos are not covered at all. The essays are authored by researchers with long-term association with Southeast Asia and the challenges confronting these nations and are derived from papers presented by them at Euro SEAS 2019, a leading conference on Southeast Asia studies. This volume would be invaluable for academics and students involved in area studies, Southeast Asia Studies, Social Sciences, and Humanities in general. Foundations working in Southeast Asia, NGOs, think tanks and development agencies could also find it useful.

Note on the Reviewer

Vinod Kumar Pillai is an independent scholar with an interest in literary fiction, development studies, popular science and short-story writing. He has published book reviews in the *Rising Asia Journal* (www.rajraf.org)

¹⁷ Tandos Rosita, et al., “The Protection and Empowerment of Indonesian Female Migrant Domestic Workers: Proposals from a Multi-Stage Analysis,” *Asian Journal of Women’s Studies* 28, no. 2 (April 2022), 205–227, doi:10.1080/12259276.2022.2051818. https://resolver.scholarsportal.info/resolve/12259276/v28i0002/205_tpaewpfama.xml



on topics related to the literatures and politics of Southeast Asia. His chapter has appeared in the edited book, *Between Homelands in Michael Ondaatje's Fiction*, published by Routledge in 2024. and is a reader for the Bengal Club Book Club. He holds a graduate degree in Agricultural Sciences, and worked for over thirty years in banking, specializing in industrial credit, training, behavioral science, and counseling. Besides literary fiction, development studies, popular science and training, he also devotes time to jyotish, podcasting and stock photography.