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BOOK REVIEW

The Spectra of Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia

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The Spectra of Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia is timely as democracy is being tested around the world, including the Southeast Asia. Until recently, democracy and human rights are often regarded as separate matters, with limited relation to one another. In theory, democracy concerns more than mere elections, and this is more so in the context of Southeast Asia where democratic practice is in question. This book contains chapters from eight experts in Southeast Asia, each exploring different but inter-related issues regarding authoritarianism and its linkage with human rights. The range of this book is broad. Apart from building the analysis with fine-grained evidence from the case studies in Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia, what makes this book distinctive is that it also includes a chapter on civil society and a chapter on National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs).

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With most countries falling into the category of authoritarianism, this book emphasizes how the concept of authoritarianism is interpreted in the Southeast Asian context, such as limiting political expression, the distinctive role of the military in countries like Indonesia and Thailand, as well as the state-civil society relations. The human rights framework that is put forward is to be applauded as much literature related to authoritarianism and democracy often neglect such framework and generally consider it as less important, more so in the context of Southeast Asia. As highlighted, one has to recognize that authoritarian regimes in this region differ and do not seem to hold similar characteristics as each reflects different degrees of the use and/or abuse of political power.

The discourse of authoritarianism uncovered in this book identifies similar trends, such as the regimes featuring limited political pluralism, restrictions on the exercise of rights and freedoms through oppressive legislation, low levels of citizen participation, and limited understanding on the concept of democracy. To varying degrees, authoritarian states in the Southeast Asia possess some common features that threaten human rights, freedom, and the rule of law, though the and amount of oppression they impose upon citizens, and the extent of violence they use to achieve their goals does vary.

This book also reveals the complex and ambiguous linkage between human rights and democracy. Southeast Asian countries are comparatively well represented in the ratification of core human rights treaties. Yet, paradoxically, those countries ratifying the largest number of treaties are frequently the ones with the poorest human rights records. Most countries ratify treaties, which they then go on to either not enforce them or enforce poorly, thereby not only negatively implicating human rights nationally, but also weakening support for a the regional human rights mechanism in the ASEAN.

Chapters related to human rights treaties, civil society and the NHRIs demonstrate the inter-linkage of Southeast Asia's evolving authoritarianism with shrinking civic spaces. The political polarization has to some extent answered the questions of where state-civil society relations are leading to, but there is no offer of a concrete solution in this book. As democracy has unravelled in the region, regimes have pushed back against critical civil society and their

human rights obligations. Moreover, as this book has rightly highlighted, the rise of conservatism among the citizens may be exacerbated by authoritarian regimes, which encourage citizens turning to the right maybe because of political ignorance. This poses a danger to the democratic spirit and enhances the reach of authoritarianism in the region.

Drawing upon recent and current case studies in Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia to illuminate distinct democracy models and tease apart how each regime functions, recent developments are characterized by increasingly sophisticated tactics of repression. In some, such as the Thailand and Indonesia, people continue to face the influence of the military that has certainly targeted dissenters. As the chapters illustrates, these three countries manifest different patterns of political structures and different shades of authoritarianism, including the role of the state and political parties. In all, though, we see starkly the gap between state-civil society relations and the emphasis on human rights. As discussed, this impacts not only the human rights situation in individual countries but also the establishment of a credible human rights system in the Southeast Asia region.

Political scientists have long placed contestation at the fore of definitions of authoritarianism. This book however does not provide a comprehensive conceptual clarification of the practice of authoritarianism in the region as it only covers three countries as case studies, and that leads to the limited engagement on how authoritarianism is different from other regions, or the question of how it conflicts with human rights. While this book has covered the salience of civil society and ways in which regimes and their leaders sustain dominance, another aspect that could strengthen the argument of this book is to provide an economic perspective of the authoritarianism in Southeast Asia.

This book demonstrates that we need to delve deeper to ask not just what authoritarianism is and how it happens, but also about the importance of the civil society, as well as the need to respect human rights. It is only with an understanding of the issues and problems, including their simplicity and complexities, that it will be possible to activate more political discourse in the region on authoritarianism and human rights.

In all, the analysis of this book provides a path for scholars and practitioners, especially in the region, to rethink how we interpret authoritarianism and how we could strengthen citizen representation to trigger reforms not only at the country level but also at the regional level. Also, notably important is to have home-grown scholars to contribute into the literature of authoritarianism and human rights in the region.