



Decentralization and Local Governance in Southeast Asia: A Passing Review of Development, Reforms and Approaches

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Abstract

Rapid change towards urbanization has taken some governments unaware, both at local and national levels. Cities across Southeast Asian region do not form part of the exceptions, particularly in facing problems of increasing poverty; lack of basic amenities and services such as water supply, electricity, sanitation, housing, education and healthcare; worsening pollution and depletion of natural resources; crippling traffic congestion; declining safety and security, and increased dissatisfaction by urban residents. This qualitative study used the general inductive approach and discourse analysis to discuss and gain deeper understanding of decentralization and local governance in Southeast Asia by looking into the patterns of development, reforms, and approaches. It further presents the varied discourses on prospects and directions in local governance in Southeast Asia and mechanisms used for regional inclusiveness and development.

Keywords: Decentralization/ Local Governance/ Local Development Reforms/
Comparative Local Governance

Many Asian cities lack the mandate, resources and capacities to deal with multiple issues (Kioe Sheng, 2011). The United Nations, at the same time, published in its 1997 issue of the State of the World Population that “*The growth of cities will be the single largest influence on development in the first half of the 21st century.*” After ten years (2007), a similar report was published and it says, “*In 2008, the world reaches an invisible but momentous milestone. For the first time in history, more than half of its population, 3.3 billion people, will be living in urban areas.*” Further it said that urbanization growth is expected to rise in most of the developing countries in the world, particularly in Asia.

Between the 1870s and World War II, Southeast Asia falls in world shipping costs and Western industrialization gave rise to its export-led growth and specialization in a narrow range of primary commodity exports. A linked development was the emergence of a few dominant Southeast Asian urban centers, typically primate ports. It is argued that different commodities produced different spread effects, resulting in variation in degrees of urban concentration in the region. However, geography, path dependence and infrastructure also shaped urban systems

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development. The main cities that emerged during this period became the “gateways” that connected frontier Southeast Asia to the global economy (Huff, 2012).

It is widely held that decentralization improves the quality of governance. A government that is closer to its people works best, since it has a better feel of the concerns of local constituents. In turn, citizens and community groups can better participate in the affairs of government under a decentralized system. Proximity serves to enhance preference matching for public services. Moving the decision-making closer to people who are affected by those decisions lowers both information costs requirements and transaction costs. Conversely, a centralized approach to management of the economy stymies development at the local level.

Gonzalez and Mendoza (n.a.) noted that across Southeast Asia, decentralization has proceeded slowly and unevenly. Nevertheless, many services like agriculture, education, health, social welfare, environmental management and even public works are increasingly being decentralized in the region, in accordance with the principles of fiscal decentralization. But sub-national governments in Southeast Asia generally have poor fiscal capacities, suggesting little authority or poor showing in tax generation and borrowings, and high vertical imbalance (dependence on central to local transfers). Strong citizen participation in the articulation of local preferences is found in Thailand and the Philippines. But collective action problems have hamstrung attempts to lower corruption levels and promote transparency in the region’s local governments.

Thus, this paper aimed to review the patterns of development, reforms and approaches in decentralization and local governance in Southeast Asia by (1) Revisiting the development of decentralization reforms in the region, and (2) Exploring the structures and dynamics of local governance.

To satisfy the objectives of this study, the researcher was guided by qualitative research design – specifically, the inductive approach using varied literatures and publications. It involves the search for pattern from observation and the development of explanations – theories – for those patterns (Bernard, 2011).

Origins and Evolution: Patterns of Decentralization Reforms

The concept of decentralization is relatively new in some countries like Cambodia. Crisis sparked decentralization in Indonesia and the Philippines, while in Vietnam it is part of a gradual process of market and public sector reform. In a few cases, decentralization is essentially complete (in structure if not in practice), such as in the Philippines, or heavily in process, such as in Indonesia. In other cases reforms are less advanced, either with limited policy development, as in Cambodia, or a substantial but only modestly implemented framework, as in Thailand.

Smoke (2012) accounted in his study describing the Philippines having the strongest history of democratic decentralization in the region. Its colonial heritage established limited democratic roots, and a series of presidential decrees enacted under the Marcos government—including the Local Tax Code, the Real Property Tax Code, and the Local Fiscal Administration Code—laid the institutional foundation for decentralization. Philippines re-established democracy after the fall of Marcos in



1986, and decentralization and local autonomy were among the fundamental principles embodied in the 1987 Constitution. In 1991 constitutional provisions begin to take robust shape through the Local Government Code, which mandated significant devolution to local governments. Today a formal decentralization framework is essentially complete, but much effort remains to realize full implementation.

He also noted the decentralization elements in Indonesia during Dutch colonial period. As in many ethnically diverse countries colonized by European powers, building national unity through greater centralization was Indonesia's goal after independence. Weak attempts to decentralize in the 1970s and 1980s did not gain political momentum. The East Asian economic crisis in 1997 hastened the fall of the Soeharto regime. Around that time, a successful independence referendum in the former province of East Timor and growing complaints from resource-rich provinces about insufficient revenue autonomy increased pressure for reform. The 1999 decentralization legislation was a direct response to this political crisis and a perceived need to hold the diverse and tenuously unified country together. The reform devolved power primarily to sub-provincial governments, largely because of fear among national leaders that empowered provinces could fuel regional ethnic and political conflicts, leading to further separatism or federalism. Indonesia revised the initial decentralization framework legislation in 2004. This increased higher-level control but left unresolved important aspects of the intergovernmental system. Local capacity is deficient in many areas. Citizens and government officials, both elected and appointed, are still learning to function in the evolving democratic environment.

Vietnam, which become a centrally planned communist state after the Vietnam War, has increasingly formalized the subnational government framework since the mid-1990s. As in China, economic reforms spurred initial progress on intergovernmental reform. The center still exerts substantial control, but subnational governments have some discretion. Provinces have greater powers, including considerable authority over lower levels. Popular participation and grassroots demand for political voice have grown, but Vietnam remains a one-party state and a fairly centrally driven system. The country has moved forward with its decentralization framework and conducted some successful policy experiments, but implementation is uneven and additional reforms are required.

Thailand has been modestly enhancing the role of subnational entities for some time, but decentralization has been a priority only since the Seventh National Economic and Social Development Plan (1991–96). This plan emphasized developing local infrastructure, providing credit to expand and improve local services, and helping local authorities mobilize capital and pursue development projects. The May 5 democracy movement emerged in the mid-1990s to demand stronger democratic institutions more insulated from the military, which has long played a pivotal role in Thai politics. The Eighth Plan (1997–2002) advocated stronger local institutions, the 1997 Constitution formally enshrined decentralization, and later legislation detailed it. The country has formally adopted many reforms but implemented few of them, and political consensus on further progress remains unclear.

Cambodia's decentralization is relatively unique. Following elections brokered by the United Nations in 1993, the center reclaimed power from provincial



governors—who had previously ruled with a free hand—in order to impose discipline on the intergovernmental system. Reforms adopted in 2001 led to the election of commune councils and provided them small intergovernmental transfers without formal service responsibilities or own-source revenues. This approach focuses on meeting immediate community needs and developing trust between citizens and the government as a first step in decentralization. Provincial reforms have been limited, except for the adaptation of Seila mechanisms to provide provincial support to communes and a few ad hoc reforms by individual sectoral ministries. A program to build capacity is under way and the country is planning further reforms, but it is unclear how the system will evolve.

T.G. McGee (1995), by giving emphasis to the unique feature of Asian urban agglomerations, has coined the term *desakota* development to describe their growth, combining the Bahasa terms *desa* (village) and *kota* (city) to indicate their mixed rural-urban characteristics. He observed that these city-regions tend to “produce an amorphous and amoeba-like spatial form, with no set boundaries or geographic extent and along regional peripheries; their radii sometimes stretching 75 to 100 km from the urban core. This territory – comprising the central city, developments within the transportation corridors, satellite towns and other projects in the peri-urban fringe and the other zones – is emerging as a single, economically integrated “mega-urban region” or “extended metropolitan region.”

In his book, Laquian (2005) also noted that most Asian mega-cities have expanded into mega-urban regions that encompass much larger territories and populations. Despite governmental efforts to restrict or even reverse the growth of mega-cities by using various administrative and economic measures, such as internal passport systems that limit benefits to bona fide urban residents in Vietnam; use of green belts to confine growth within highly urbanized areas in Malaysia; eviction and resettlement of inner city dwellers to outlying areas in the Philippines; and transmigration schemes to move urban residents to frontier areas in Indonesia, mega-urban regions have continued to grow. This “spreading pancake” or “palm and fingers” expansion pattern has engulfed small towns, cities and other settlements in the urban periphery, joined the urban fields of other large cities, and formed city clusters or sprawling mega-urban regions.

Urbanization Pattern: Issues and Challenges

The emergence of mega-urban regions in Asia has posed a number of challenges to city and regional planning. The traditional instrument for development of Asian cities has been physical planning, which is designed to control and guide the material elements in cities and towns like roads and transportation networks, waterworks, drainage, sewerage and sanitation systems, energy generation and distribution, garbage dumps, landfills and incinerators, housing, and many others. This approach is usually confined to “*hardware*” elements and fails to take into consideration the economic and social processes – “*software*,” that often exert stronger influences on the development of city regions.

There is a shortage of planners who are adequately trained in comprehensive planning and take economic, social and environmental factors into consideration



when formulating city region plans. Most city and regional planners in Asia are architects, engineers, surveyors and other technically-oriented individuals who often fail to appreciate the important role played by socio-economic processes in urban life. As observed by a former World Bank economist, most big city problems in developing countries may be traced to “*wrong headed national urbanization policies promoted by physical planners with visions of optimal geography and very little sense of economics*” (Hamer, 1994).

Urban and regional planning in Asia is deeply influenced by the concept of rural-urban dichotomy. Many government officials as well as staff members of multilateral and bilateral aid agencies firmly believe that the main issue in Asia is rural development and that the solution to alleviating absolute poverty is improving agricultural productivity, building farm to market roads, instituting land reform schemes, and encouraging farm mechanization.

Urban areas suffer from extreme fragmentation among competing local jurisdictions. Extreme fragmentation, urban plans are confined to the formal boundaries of municipalities or metropolitan areas. Legal ordinances, zoning codes and land use rules and regulations promulgated by city councils and municipal boards are applicable only within their jurisdictional areas. As cities have become mega-cities and these, in turn, have evolved into mega-urban regions, traditional planning approaches have not kept pace with substantive and technical developments.

Most city region plans in Asian agglomerations are not formally adopted as legally binding enactments – many are primarily conceptual and regarded as “indicative guidelines” for the future development of mega-urban regions. This phenomenon is mainly due to the legalistic tradition that vests authority for planning and enactment of zoning codes and land use regulations in cities or municipalities that have their own specific charters.

Moreover, in his study on issues and challenges in urbanization, Yap (2011) clearly noted and discussed how Southeast Asia is steadily urbanizing. He further mentioned that in 1950, only 15.5 % of its population lived in urban areas. In 2010, it was 41.8 % (or about 250 million people) and it is expected to have increased to 50 % by 2025. Urbanization and economic development often mutually reinforce each other, and the most urbanized countries are generally also the most economically developed. That is also the case in Southeast Asia, although official statistics may show a different picture.

Official statistics do not fully reflect the urban reality. Definitions of “urban” differ from one country to another and thus are not always comparable; and political motives rather than actual conditions may determine when a settlement is actually declared “urban.” According to United Nations statistics, Manila is Southeast Asia’s only mega-city (a city with a total population of more than ten million), but if the peri-urban population is included, some cities have much larger populations. Jones (2008) estimated that the population of the mega-urban regions of Bangkok, Jakarta and Manila is twice the official figures. Many urban areas in Southeast Asia are also destinations of large numbers of temporary migrants who may or may not be included in the population counts.



The attention on mega-cities hides the fact that a majority of the urban population in Southeast Asia lives in smaller cities and towns. According to UN Population Division (2010) only 13.8 percent lives in cities with more than five million inhabitants, while 67 percent of Southeast Asia's urban population (165 million people) lives in urban settlements with less than 500,000 inhabitants. Smaller cities and towns do not receive the attention they deserve as places of residence for the majority of the urban population.

The high concentration of people, economic activities and services in a relatively small area has a profound impact on urban society and economy. Urban economies of scale and agglomeration lead to better access to services, greater prosperity and changes in lifestyle, but rapid urbanization also leads to increased slums and squatter settlements, social alienation and environmental pollution.

Universal education and ICT are making ever larger sections of the population, including the poor, aware of how “the other half” lives and how people's power can change the status quo. Television, and now the social media, highlighted these events in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand. What people see is affecting their voting behavior, but also their preparedness for extra-parliamentary action. “Countries realize that inequality is contributing to social tensions and lost opportunities,” according to the World Bank (Reuters, 2011).

CSOs, Citizen Engagements in the Local Governance Landscape of SEA

Many driving forces at the global, national and local levels have influenced recent trends toward greater political devolution and transfer of financial authority from the center to regions and local areas - the demise of the former Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, increases in ethnic conflicts and demand for greater recognition of cultural, religious and regional traditions, the focus of bilateral donors, multilateral agencies and non-governmental organizations, and the demands by groups and individuals within countries for greater control over local political processes, greater transparency, better access to services and more openness in political decision-making processes.

In addition to global and nation-specific reasons, there are also region-specific factors that have led to the expanding role of local governments, including the need to decentralize service delivery Southeast Asia. With the evolution in thinking about development and governance and the rapid pace of democratization around the world, the concepts and practices of decentralization too have changed over the past few decades. Decentralization was defined as the transfer of authority, responsibility and resources - through deconcentration, delegation or devolution – from the center to lower levels of administration (Rondinelli, 1981; Rondinelli, Nellis & Cheema, 1983).

Indonesia has undergone a complete transition from authoritarianism to democracy, with CSOs playing a prominent role. In turn, the democratic government and decentralization reforms have facilitated further growth of CSOs and embedded them in the political and social landscape. This transition and freeing of society, according to Cheema (2011) was an uneven process. In the 1980s, CSOs went from complete emasculation to a gradual acknowledgement by the Suharto government that



the state alone could not bear the full costs of development and therefore needed the participation of communities. The advocacy groups established in the 1980s were building blocks for the democracy movement. They formed an important element in the aggressive public pressure on the Suharto government that emerged in the mid-1990s and led to the emergence of a discourse on good governance, accountability and transparency of public institutions.

The evolution and growth of civil society in Malaysia could be divided into four distinctive periods that reflect social and political changes in the country. The first phase (pre-1957) was characterized by people's activism in Malaya through political parties which were based on ethnicity and religion. The colonial rulers introduced repressive laws such as the Societies Ordinance to check either the spread of illegal secret societies or the activities of the communists. During the second phase (1957-1980), the colonial legacy of preventive arrest and curtailment of fundamental rights was continued in order to suppress communist ideology and racial tension, even though the constitution provided for the protection of fundamental human rights. However, the labor movement continued to be active. During the third period (1981 to 2003) under Mahathir, the concepts of strong state and Malaysia specific democracy provided the context within which fundamental liberties were curtailed. The "Asian values" argument was presented to justify strong government actions vis-à-vis individual liberties. The fourth phase started with the resignation of Mahathir in 2003. Though no major amendments to laws dealing with fundamental liberties were made, more space was provided to citizens through such mechanisms as internet websites, bloggers and related tools of information technology. These new tools empowered small organizations and activists to challenge the strong arm of the state and led to the emergence of new civil society networks that transcended ethnicity, religion and area of advocacy (Cheema, 2011).

The Cambodian government has expressed its commitment to decentralization and to develop local political institutions, with the backing of international donors. The commune's executive and legislative functions were introduced in 2001 and the commune is tasked with ensuring the well-being of citizens, including service delivery, protection of natural resources, social and economic development planning, and public order. The first commune elections were held in February 2002. However, decentralization is still in its infancy and implementation is problematic due to poor coordination between ministries and inconsistencies between decentralization and other reforms. The lack of resources and information about decentralization measures are also major challenges.

Recent developments in Thailand have aimed to decentralize responsibilities and finances to local governments in order for them to deliver services to the citizenry with greater efficiency, social equity, accountability and responsiveness than was the case before the promulgation of the 1997 Constitution. Thai constitution specifically made public participation an important objective at the local level. In theory, fiscal and democratic decentralization coupled with citizen participation are supposed to translate into local government that not only delivers better services, but one that also engages citizens in the design and implementation of policies, programs and projects.



For centuries Thailand was a highly centralized state. This changed in 1997 with a new constitution and the first mention of decentralization. In 1998 the first Tambon council elections were held and in 2004 municipal mayors were directly elected for the first time. The decentralization Act was passed in 1999, but implementation began in 2001. However, decentralization has not resulted in the formation of popular representative bodies at local level and research shows that many people, especially in rural areas, feel detached from local governance processes that are dominated by the interests of well-connected power holders and local elites.

Decentralization policies were introduced in the Philippines during the term of President Aquino from 1986 to 1992. With decentralization, local governments were given the power to collect taxes, borrow money and receive 40% of internal revenue allocations. The ground-breaking Local Government Code of 1991 recognized the vital role that civil society can play and formalized the participation of citizens within different aspects of local governance. However despite progressive legislation on paper, elite-driven patronage politics still continues.

As in other Southeast Asian countries, Labonne (2012) described how the decentralization in the Philippines has failed to live up to original expectations in terms of improved service delivery at the local level. While this situation is often blamed on inadequate fiscal arrangements, additional resources are not used effectively due to poor governance practices at the municipal-level. As some had originally feared, elected local officials tend to use their new resources and discretion to prolong their time in office.

In his paper, Labonne discussed that there is robust evidence consistent with a causal impact of being related to a local official on the probability of being employed in the public sector. The most conservative estimate indicates that being related to an elected local official increase the probability of public sector employment by more than 36 percent, or 2.9 percentage points. Moreover, there is also evidence that elected officials' relatives are more likely to be enrolled in a subsidized health insurance program but this effect does not appear to be causal.

Strikingly, he showed that relatives of unsuccessful candidates are less likely to work in the public sector. As such, local officials might be reluctant to staff their bureaucracy with their opponents' relatives. Overall, findings are consistent with the view that local officials have the ability to reward their relatives and to punish their political opponents. When deciding whether to run, candidates need to account for the large negative impact that their relatives will experience. This could explain the low levels of electoral competition in the Philippines, with a large number of candidates running unopposed in the 2010 elections, Labonne further explained. His findings also revealed that in more than 1,600 cities and municipalities that compose the country, about 8% of mayoral candidates and 9% of vice-mayoral candidates ran opposed. Those candidates only need one vote to win, hereby muting electoral competition with nefarious long-term consequences on the quality of political leadership at the local level.



Looking into a New Paradigm for Inclusive Local Development

Several countries follow a unitary system of government where local governments are often the only sub-national layers of government, thus putting them directly under central government oversight. These include, for instance, Indonesia and Thailand. On the other hand, in a federal government structure, for example in Malaysia, states or provinces can be quite powerful and are usually responsible for overseeing the functions of local governments, both urban and rural. Countries like East Timor and Myanmar are going through a critical transition phase, from conflict to peace, and from significant centralized control to a gradual opening up and sharing of power and responsibilities between different levels of government.

In terms of devolution of key functions, on paper, several countries have devolved a large number of functions to local governments, especially urban governments which have greater technical and financial capacities than their rural counterparts. However, this devolution is often unclear, or inadequate. Malaysia, for instance, has a federal system organized in three tiers: central, state and local. The constitution makes provisions for local government through a number of legislations, but the distribution of functions between the three tiers of government is often overlapping, either leading to duplication of efforts, or resulting in inaction from any level. Many metropolitan areas and city regions often lie outside the purview of the “regular” legislation and policies related to decentralization, and may have exceptional powers

and/or resources. National capital territories are usually governed directly by the central government, even where local government is a state/provincial responsibility, for example the Kuala Lumpur federal territory or the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration.

Studies show that the rise of cities has gone hand in hand with strong economic growth in China, India, and elsewhere across the developing world. Similar forces are at work across Southeast Asia, where urban areas account for more than 65 percent of the region’s GDP. International institutions and organizations, such as the Asian Development Bank, highlighted that ASEAN’s urbanization trend is about much more than the continued growth of its largest cities. The region has 215 smaller “middleweight” cities that are growing faster than its well-known capitals, and they are expected to drive almost 40 percent of the region’s GDP growth through 2030. Eighty-nine of the region’s cities are expected to experience real annual GDP growth of more than 7 percent, and only two of these are large cities with populations exceeding five million, Yangon and Manila.

The continuing tide of urbanization will reshape society across Southeast Asia. It is ultimately more efficient to deliver infrastructure and public services to a more densely concentrated population, and as a result, urbanization may help the region make solid gains in educational attainment and access to health care. In the largest cities, governments will find it challenging to keep pace with the demand for affordable housing, water and power infrastructure, transit systems, schools, and hospitals. Encouraging smart growth in the region’s small and midsize urban areas, where it is easier to build the necessary physical and social infrastructure, can help to alleviate some of the stresses on the region’s largest cities; it can also ensure that



economic clout, job opportunities, and social services are more evenly distributed throughout multiple regions.

Rapid urbanization has long been condemned, but it is now increasingly seen as a source of development. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) is promoting city-clusters by financing urban infrastructure to link cities and towns within a region to improve their economic development potential (Choe and Laquian 2008). Some clusters are dominated by a single mega-city like Bangkok, Manila and Jakarta, but others are 'urban corridors' that connect large cities and smaller cities and towns in between.

Most city-clusters are within a single country, but new clusters are developing across borders, as ASEAN is promoting economic cooperation by its members through improving trade and transport facilitation. They exploit the complementariness of labor, capital and space – the geographically contiguous areas in different countries – to gain a competitive edge in the global economy. Besides benefiting the private sector, they support the growth and development of secondary cities and towns in a country's interior, that have been bypassed by development until now. They, thereby, contribute to a more balanced economic growth and spread of the urban population. An established cluster is the Singapore-Johor-Riau growth triangle, based on cooperation agreements between the three countries – Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore.

Cities represent growth markets for infrastructure, transportation, health care, education, housing, and recreation. Large cities are also magnets for talent, including workers with greater levels of skills and education. Additionally, governments can provide basic services more effectively and to larger populations in cities. McKinsey's research has found that delivering a number of basic services, such as piped water, to dense urban areas is up to 50 percent cheaper than delivering basic services to sparsely populated areas. All this will lead to a larger and more affluent ASEAN urban population with greater spending power. These consumers will drive demand for both new and existing products and services, presenting a huge opportunity for businesses.

City, regional, and national governments have to take active steps to capture this economic potential. On a basic level, it takes well-planned infrastructure to sustain both the growing populations and the businesses that provide jobs. Without the right underpinnings, cities can experience a downward spiral as they grow.

Different approaches may be appropriate for different sectors and different functions, and options may evolve in accordance with economic conditions. For example, in countries with limited experience with democratic processes and weak civil society organizations, it may be difficult for local constituents to hold elected local officials accountable. In such cases, at least in the short run, deconcentrated subnational administrative units may be in a better position than elected local governments to deliver public services and reduce poverty. Delegation would be considered in contexts where a local government system is evolving, or supervision is required to ensure quality. Conversely, devolution can serve as an instrument for poverty reduction in countries where elected local governments are already assigned



significant expenditure responsibilities and are generally capable of efficient service delivery.

Evidence from around the world shows that a “local approach” may not be the solution to economic, social and environmental challenges but can certainly be part of the solution. A future is possible where rural areas will thrive, cities act as hubs for development and the benefits of growth are shared across and within countries. Hence, key actors need to act strategically and deliberately from the global to the local level.

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