

Rethinking Political Development in Southeast Asia

A conference organized by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
and Friedrich Naumann Foundation, Singapore,
held in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, 10-14 May 1991.

Southeast Asia is a cornucopia of ethnic, religious, lingual, political, cultural and social diversity. How to describe and analyse political development in this region by paying attention to both individual characteristics and general trends? We had the legal-formal approach, the political modernization approach, the will and capacity approach and various Marxist and neo-Marxist approaches.

The region was looked at from the outside, from within and from a Third World perspective. We were told that underdevelopment is an external, not an internal problem, and is caused as well as maintained by the world capitalist system. Societies are "fragmented" and "loosely structured", culture is "damaged," there is "Cacique" democracy in the Philippines - a country which allegedly witnessed a revolution at EDSA for four days in Februar 1986. In Malaysia, despite democratic structures and process, a democratic culture is absent. In Thailand we have democracy, Thai style. Thai politics, some say, is a "vicious circle," while to others, it is a unique and fabulous balancing act. There is little progress anywhere because of the "moral economy" of South-east Asian peasantry.

This compilation could be easily extended and the organizers of the conference found it worthwhile to take a fresh look at and to examine existing concepts and approaches. The participants were provided with excellent and thought-provoking guidelines written by Norma Mahmood. The conference itself was a handy-sized affair. Just about 20 people met at a splendid beach resort in most pleasant, inspiring surroundings. All this was very conducive to free discussion and exchange of ideas; a conference superbly organized, primarily by Selena Gan and Wolfgang Sachsenröder. Their preparations were appreciated and enjoyed by one Australian, two Americans, three Germans and scholars from Southeast Asia.

After the groundwork had been laid by Wolfgang Sachsenröder and Zakaria Hj Ahmad, the first session was devoted to the re-appraisal of models, non-Marxist and neo-Marxist. This was followed by the presentation and discussion of case studies on Indonesia, Burma, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Werner Venneward from the University of Hamburg

explained his new approach towards Asian political development by concentrating on strategic groups and political culture.

The conference benefitted from the presence of two Southeast Asia specialists who are superb experts on Burma. James Guyot spoke on "Privatizing a Praetorian Regime" and Josef Silverstein acted as discussant. They presented their case with scholarly sobriety as well as with zeal.

Randolf David chaired the concluding session in which Josef Silverstein made a comparative analysis, Zakaria Hj Ahmad and Wilfrido Villacorta proposed a framework for a synthesis of the proceedings of the conference and presented their ideas on a revised model of development. Werner Pfennig tried to sum up his reflections about what was said during the seminar by structuring his concluding remarks along seven questions, concentrating on development, change, learning capacity, structures, legitimacy and modernization. He stated that modernization must be social, economic and political progress and could be expressed with four words: interdependence, increased knowledge, politicization. Taking up a point made by Harold Crouch, he felt that in the search for a better future some good answers to problems of present Southeast Asia might be found in its pre-colonial past.

During the conference, "rethinking political development in Southeast Asia" was done carefully and thoroughly. This turned out to be so strenuous that almost no energy was left for anyone to come up with a refined and revised model of development, very much to the regret of Norma Mahmood who was the intellectual and organizational driving force behind this conference, the fourth in a series. However, she is determined to have the edited version of the proceedings printed as soon as possible. Hopefully, this book will be as successful as the volume on "Political Contestation. Case Studies from Asia" which was published in 1990.

Werner Pfennig