

*The Portuguese in Sri Lanka and South India* is a well-written monograph containing a carefully selected body of case studies. It is especially useful for readers familiar with the colonial histories of Portugal, Sri Lanka or South India or interested in using new supplementary sources to study the beginnings of the age of globalization and deepen points of interest.

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ZHENG YONGNIAN / LYE LIANG FOOK / WILHELM HOFMEISTER (eds), *Parliaments in Asia. Institution Building and Political Development*. (Politics in Asia). London / New York: Routledge, 2014. XX, 297 pages, \$155.00. ISBN 978-0-415-68158-2

This is the second book on parliaments sponsored by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, after *Parliaments and Political Change in Asia* by Jürgen Rüländ, Clemens Jürgenmeyer, Michael Nelson and Patrick Ziegenhain (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005; see review by Marco Bünthe in issue 3–4/2010 of this journal). In contrast to the systematic approach of the earlier book, Zheng Yongnian, Lye Liang Fook and Wilhelm Hofmeister opted for a collection of country studies, including Singapore, China, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Japan, South Korea, India, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Normally, one expects such a book to start with a systematic introduction, including perhaps a brief outline of a common framework for the country chapters, and end with a conclusion that draws together important issues and identifies differences in the operation of parliaments in the countries covered. A conclusion could also have served to support the initial claim that “parliaments do matter” (p. 5), and to explain in greater depth their contribution to “political development” in Asia (as compared to other factors). Regrettably, this publication includes neither such an introduction nor a concluding chapter.

It seems somewhat odd that the first three country chapters deal with authoritarian countries: Singapore, China and Vietnam. After all, it is worth pondering whether in these countries one can even speak of parliaments in the usual sense since their existence might not be institutionally independent of the respective ruling party. This reviewer was mildly amused by the claim that the “people’s congress system has exercised a more and more important role in promoting political democratization in China” (p. 47). The chapters on China and Vietnam read like formalistic official texts issued by the respective communist parties. Generally, the authors brought together in this book do not seem to have empirical first-hand knowledge of the workings of the parliaments they write about. Moreover, it is not clear what “parliament” is supposed to refer to. Thus, readers are treated to an almost entirely legalistic text about the Philippines. The author on Taiwan dedicates his text to the constituency services offered by

the representatives to their electorate, a vital aspect which is missing from all the other chapters. However, are constituency services actually a function of parliament, or are they tasks for political parties and representatives aiming for re-election? Institutionally, do these activities fall within the remit of parliament or of political parties? Where are the boundaries? On this point, the chapter on South Korea notes that the “fluidity of Korean political parties [...] makes it difficult for the National Assembly to act as a coherent whole” (p. 195). Indeed, one might well ask to what extent parliaments can be considered unified institutions in view of the fact that they are made up of political parties and individual representatives and explicitly incorporate an internal division between government and opposition. Is parliament’s contribution to “political development” independent of that of political parties, Members of Parliament, voters, the executive, the election system, or constitutional development?

These issues point to the lack of a proper conceptualization of parliaments in the political systems that the book covers, including the notion of “political development”. Is the relatively small amount of legislation passed by the Thai House of Representatives negative by comparison with the very large number of bills proposed and passed by the South Korean National Assembly? To reach a conclusion about such a vital question, these chapters should have done what the editors promised in their introduction, namely detailed the respective “local context”. The way these data are presented, readers are unable to understand what the different figures for Thailand and South Korea mean for the fulfilment of their parliaments’ legislative function, or what they indicate about different stages of institution-building and political development. At the same time, one learns that the South Korean National Assembly “is now an object of deepening public disenchantment”, despite its “legislative activism” (p. 204). Thus, it seems that introducing and passing bills does not necessarily represent institutional advancement, or political development, at least not in the perception of a public that bemoans the “naked power struggle” (p. 204) in parliament. The authors of the chapter on Indonesia also seem to have serious doubts when they ask, “After all the elections and power struggle, where is the substance? Where is the development that democracy has promised us in the first place?” (p. 107). And the author on Japan speaks of “de-parliamentarization” (p. 156) due to an overpowering central bureaucracy. Given the subtitle of the book, it should have been the task of the editors to reflect on such issues.

In sum, although this book leaves this reviewer dissatisfied, it nevertheless provides readers with some basic information on parliaments in Asia, a field of study that has, perhaps understandably, been neglected compared to other elements of the region’s political systems.

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