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# SOUTHEAST ASIA: IN THE SHADOW OF CHINA

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In the April 2012 edition of the *Journal of Democracy*, four leading political scientists cast critical eyes upon the progress (or lack thereof) that democracy has been making in Southeast Asia. Thitinan Pongsudhirak looked at the troubled prospects for democracy in his home country of Thailand; Martin Gainsborough asked why democracy has failed to flower in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam; Dan Slater analyzed “strong-state democratization” in Singapore and Malaysia; and Don Emmerson surveyed the region more generally. A common theme—seen especially in Slater’s and Gainsborough’s contributions—was the roles that domestic elites, state structures, and money play in explaining the unevenness of democratic development across the region.

Each author alluded to but did not solve a core problem that bedevils all discussions of democracy in Southeast Asia. As a region that has experienced vast political and economic advances in recent years, Southeast Asia should be a showcase displaying the positive link (so long a political-science staple) between development and democracy. In nearby Northeast Asia, South Korea and Taiwan both offer good examples of this link between economic and political modernization: Each country went through a long stretch of economic development overseen by an authoritarian regime that clung to power even as rising prosperity spawned a large and increasingly restive middle class. Then, in the late 1980s, each regime launched a process of political liberalization that led in fairly short order to democracy. Along with Japan, East Asia’s oldest

democracy, South Korea and Taiwan are among the richest and most developed countries in the world. Their stories thus lend support to a central tenet of modernization theory.

In Southeast Asia, however, this neat relationship between economic and political development is missing. Throughout the region, the “Lipset thesis” (named for social scientist Seymour Martin Lipset), which holds that democracy is more likely in well-off countries than in poorer ones, is being stood on its head. Democracy is weak or absent in the region’s richest states (Brunei, Singapore, and Malaysia), but present to at least some degree in three of its poorer ones (Indonesia, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste). Moreover, these three democracies all feature relatively high amounts of ethnolinguistic or religious diversity, defying the conventional wisdom that sees divided societies as unfriendly soil for democracy. Indonesia, moreover, is the world’s largest Muslim-majority country, countering the thesis that democracy is incompatible with Islam. Finally, none of the three ranks high according to such well-known indices of human development as educational levels, literacy, maternal health, and the like—all usually held to correlate strongly with democracy.<sup>1</sup>

Compounding this problem is the region’s most developed state, Singapore, which represents a huge anomaly for scholars of democracy. Despite a per capita GDP of \$54,000 a year (higher than that of the United States), this city-state at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula has long been a soft-authoritarian “semidemocracy.” Larry Diamond calls it “the most economically developed nondemocracy in the history of the world.”<sup>2</sup> Singapore’s neighbor Malaysia also represents a significant challenge for democratic theory, combining as it does high levels of human development and per capita income (more than \$15,000 a year) with an illiberal competitive-authoritarian regime. Despite allowing a degree of opposition contestation, neither Singapore nor Malaysia has yet come close to experiencing a democratic turnover of government. By contrast, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste have all experienced successive handovers of power following competitive elections, an important threshold of democratic development according to some political scientists.<sup>3</sup>

Nor are these countries the only democratic anomalies in Southeast Asia. The former French colonies of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam have seen rapid economic growth and rising middle classes, but remain *de facto* or *de jure* one-party regimes with strikingly illiberal political climates, as Gainsborough well explains. In Thailand, which has only recently returned to civilian rule following the 2006 military coup, the Bangkok-based middle classes have confounded democratic theory by turning actively hostile toward majority rule since the rise of populist politician Thaksin Shinawatra rewrote the rules for winning elective office. Burma, too, fails to conform to democratic expectations: Once

the richest Southeast Asian state with widespread literacy, it has over the past forty years dropped almost to the bottom on nearly every measure of political, economic, and human development, although hopeful changes are now occurring with the election to parliament of Aung San Suu Kyi and other opposition members.<sup>4</sup>

## **A Geographical and Historical Explanation**

Southeast Asia thus presents a profound puzzle to students of democracy and democratization. How to solve it? Here, I want briefly to raise the possibility of an alternative explanation for the presence or absence of democracy across Southeast Asia. This explanation looks not to domestic sociological or even political factors, but rather to geography, international influences, and history.

First, there is the matter of geography. The distribution of civil liberties and political rights across Southeast Asia (as measured by Freedom House) follows a striking spatial pattern: All the maritime states (save Brunei) are democratic, all the mainland states that border China are autocratic, while the region's semidemocracies are geographically in-between. If we divide the region more simply between "electoral democracies" and nondemocracies, then the picture is even clearer.<sup>5</sup> This mainland-maritime democratic divide has been stable since the Philippines became an electoral democracy in the "people power" revolution of 1986, the Suharto regime fell in Indonesia in 1998, and an independent East Timor (now Timor-Leste) emerged following the end of Indonesian domination in 2001, with only Thailand changing its status over this period.

How can we explain this clear geographic demarcation of regime type? One potential explanation is that a country's location—especially its proximity to China, the core East Asian state—may offer a better explanation than more conventional analyses for what could be called Asia's distinctive "geography of democracy." The deep historical legacy of China's "tributary" relations with the countries along its southern border, in contrast to China's more limited influence over the remoter island realms of the Indonesian and Philippine archipelagoes, may offer a pathway to understanding Southeast Asia's pattern of maritime democracies and mainland autocracies.

To summarize: Throughout their changing history as traditional kingdoms, colonial fiefdoms, or modern single-party autocracies, the states along China's southern border have never been democracies. Today, Laos and Vietnam remain standout examples of the "China model" of closed and nominally communist political systems with open and mostly competitive market economies. Cambodia practices a different but analogous model of partly competitive elections under what is effectively single-party rule. Burma is currently undergoing a political opening but

shares aspects reminiscent of Cambodia's system as well as Suharto's Indonesia. This is one reason why the political openings in Burma since 2010 have so disturbed the Chinese: Burmese president Thein Sein's process of liberalization is seen as having undermined not just a close partnership between authoritarian systems but China's core strategic interest in retaining like-minded regimes around it.

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As one moves further from China, the modal regime-type also starts to loosen. The core state in mainland Southeast Asia, Thailand, has lurched between competitive democracy, military rule, and civilian quasi-democracy over the past decade. Currently, Freedom House classifies it as Partly Free. By virtue of both its geographical location and its uncertain political future, Thailand can be seen as the key

"swing state" in Southeast Asia, in terms of not just the region's democratic prospects but also China's growing influence. Moving south, soft-authoritarian systems remain in Malaysia and Singapore, two of the world's most resilient semidemocracies, combining parliamentary government with enduring single-party dominance. These two states have been described as geographically "amphibious"—half in mainland and half in maritime Southeast Asia. Their semidemocratic political models mirror this spatial positioning.

A related explanation for the durability of authoritarianism in Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and (at least until very recently) Burma compared to the relative success of democracy in maritime Southeast Asia stresses the impact of Chinese foreign policy. Traditionally, China sought to coopt its Southeast Asian neighbors through assimilation into China's sphere of influence—in sharp contrast to the centuries of wars fought against the Mongols and other northern invaders, the impetus for the Great Wall of China. There was no Great Wall in the south. Rather, over centuries, the southern kingdoms were assimilated into the Chinese sociocultural order. This happened first via the expansion of China's own borders to include Yunnan, Fujian, and Guangdong, and then via the coercion of latter-day Burma, Laos, and Vietnam into a China-focused "tributary" system that enmeshed these neighboring states in a growing web of Sinitic influence.<sup>6</sup>

The tributary system evolved under the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) as a way to formalize China's imperial authority over its southern neighbors. Only countries that acknowledged Chinese suzerainty were permitted trade relations, through officially sanctioned entry ports in Can-

ton and Kunming. “Near countries” on China’s border, such as Vietnam, were required to send tribute every three years. More distant countries were required to send tribute only infrequently.<sup>7</sup> The tribute itself, usually consisting of local luxury items, was less important than the symbolism of ritual submission to the Chinese empire, which after all stood at the center of the world and enjoyed the mandate of heaven. Acknowledgement of the supreme status of the Middle Kingdom was thus at the heart of this profoundly unequal and hierarchical worldview.

The tributary system was further reinforced by the designation of the various tributary kingdoms as “pacification superintendencies” whose responsibility was to keep the peace along China’s southern frontier. These included the Tai principalities of Luchuan and Cheli in present-day Yunnan, the Lao kingdom of Lan Xand, the Kingdom of Lan Na in northern Thailand, and the Kingdom of Ava in present-day Burma, all of which were designated as “pacification commissioners” and made to conduct their formal relations with China via Yunnan.<sup>8</sup> Nothing like this highly institutionalized sphere of influence covered the Malay Peninsula or the maritime sultanates of island Asia.

In more recent decades, this sphere of influence has been manifested via China’s support for communist revolutions and Leninist political structures in 1960s Laos and Vietnam, Beijing’s assistance to the Khmer Rouge in 1970s Cambodia, and China’s current nervousness about the possibility of democracy (and, potentially, U.S. engagement) in Burma. The rapid economic integration of southern China with Vietnam, Laos, Burma, and, increasingly, Thailand and Cambodia is another important part of this story. “Not only do China’s geographic size and proximity to Southeast Asia make China more difficult to ignore for those who exist in its shadow,” notes Alice Ba, “but they also make China relatively more interested in what happens in Southeast Asia as part of its ‘backyard.’”<sup>9</sup>

The situation of the three “China-lite” states of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam is a good example. All are former colonies of France, located next to one another. Laos and Vietnam border southern China. All witnessed the violent rise to power, culminating in the mid-1970s, of communist parties that enjoyed active or passive Chinese help. Such parties have ruled Laos and Vietnam ever since. In Cambodia, the communists rebranded themselves as the Cambodian People’s Party. Despite a 1993 UN electoral intervention, they have ruled that country more or less unchallenged for decades. All three countries have also seen rapid recent economic growth fueled by outside aid and investments that come mainly if not solely from China. All tend to support China in international forums to a greater (Cambodia) or lesser (Vietnam) extent.

China has dangled the carrots of economic engagement (in larger states such as Thailand and Vietnam) and aid (in smaller states such as Cambodia and Laos) and brandished the stick of military threats or assaults (Beijing actually invaded Vietnam in 1979) to advance its in-

terests and build a ring of protective borderland partners. Support for Leninist political models is one element of this partnership. Beijing finds it easier to relate to familiar nondemocratic regimes, particularly if they share China's quasi-communist model. Democracies are not only more alien to current Chinese authorities, but could also pose the threat of "demonstration effects" by giving the Chinese public what its rulers would see as dangerously close examples of open political competition and self-government.

Gainsborough's explanation for the resilience of autocracy in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam features internal factors such as colonial legacies, a hierarchical and paternalistic elite culture, and deeply held antipathies to pluralism.<sup>10</sup> A simpler explanation may be that each of these states once formed part of China's "tributary" system, and hence developed a political culture different from what one finds in states that sit farther from Chinese influence. This was an inherently and explicitly unequal bilateral relationship, in which smaller neighbors had to swear fealty to Chinese imperial power.

The tributary system fell apart once the West began aggressively penetrating East Asia, including China itself after the two Opium Wars (1839–42, 1856–60). As Martin Stuart-Fox recounts, China had traditionally used a combination of trade and armed force to get its way along its southern and western borders. But this system broke down amid the European scramble for Asia. Sniffing the wind, once-loyal tributaries such as the Thai kingdom rejected repeated Chinese demands for tribute and in 1882 repudiated all tributary obligations. The colonization and annexation of Indochina by the French and of Upper Burma by the British in the second half of the nineteenth century added to Beijing's losses. "For the first time," as Stuart-Fox notes, "a serious security threat existed along previously peaceful, if poorly defined, frontiers with cooperative tributary states."<sup>11</sup>

## The Afterlife of Tributary Relations

Yet even though the formal tributary system collapsed, its legacy lived on. With Japan's defeat in the Second World War and the victory over the Nationalists a few years later of Mao Zedong and his Chinese Communist Party (CCP), China began to reestablish the form if not the content of a tributary system in its neighboring "buffer states." One illustration of this was Chinese support to the nondemocratic systems of its near neighbors. Under Mao, China tried to protect friendly (North Korea, North Vietnam) or neutral (Burma, Laos) buffer states in order to keep challenges at bay. Even during the partial political opening of the post-Mao era, China continued to actively support communist parties in Laos and Vietnam while also giving military and financial aid to first the Khmer Rouge and then the People's Party in Cambodia. The historical

roots of such behavior are deep: For at least six *centuries*, Beijing has consistently sought, by means diplomatic or otherwise, to line its frontiers with friendly supplicant powers.

A current consequence of this approach is the present-day prevalence along China's southern border of single-party socialist systems complete with the same rhetorical commitments as the CCP. As Alice Ba notes:

Chinese power has greater significance for continental states that are more affected for better and worse by their proximity to [China]. For countries like Vietnam, proximity to China has critically shaped its evolution and . . . offered Vietnam a model of governance, of revolution and of post-socialist development.<sup>12</sup>

Similar observations could be made about Laos and, in a rather different way, Cambodia as well. Even the state-sponsored socialism of Ne Win's Burma was closer in form and spirit to the CCP than to anything emanating from the West.

China's active support for Southeast Asia's communist parties throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and its ties to them since, have also informed key aspects of Chinese foreign policy. Following the end of the Cold War, China attempted to fashion its politically like-minded neighbors into an Asian Socialist Community (ASC) in which "each regime seeks to preserve one-party rule based on the legitimacy of the party in the struggle for national independence, resistance to foreign intervention, and commitment to building socialism," on the understanding that all members face "a common external threat—pressure to democratize society, to allow political pluralism and to implement internationally acceptable standards of human rights."<sup>13</sup> While in formal terms nothing came of the ASC, its core vision of resolutely nondemocratic governments standing together against international pressures has remained a common touchstone for China and its socialist neighbors.

By contrast, Southeast Asian countries situated farther from the Chinese orbit, particularly those off the Asian mainland, were much less susceptible to such arrangements. Again, this follows the historical pattern, in which "differences in geographic proximity also help explain variations in substance, and especially intensity, in China's relations with Southeast Asian states."<sup>14</sup> Maritime Southeast Asia posed a much greater barrier to the extension of Chinese influence, in large part because China's bilateral relations with island Asia were historically much less developed. Of all the countries of Southeast Asia, Indonesia and the Philippines stand out in recent history as least likely to accept Chinese hegemony. As Stuart-Fox notes:

Indonesia could look back on no long historical kingdom-to-empire bilateral relations regime of the kind developed between China and Vietnam,

or Thailand, or Burma. Even less could the Philippines, whose significant trade relations with China (apart from Sulu) post-date the arrival of the Spanish and were conducted under their auspices.<sup>15</sup>

A final piece of the puzzle is the divergent way in which Southeast Asian states have reacted to the communist threat in the contemporary era. Communism, as both a doctrine and a program of political action, polarized Southeast Asia for several decades following the end of the Second World War. While communists tried to seize power in almost every Southeast Asian state, they were ultimately successful only in Indochina. Communist victories in Laos, Vietnam, and (indirectly) Cambodia were balanced by sustained and in some cases brutal resistance to communist movements in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines.

Indonesia's 1966 crackdown on communism after a coup attempt the previous year not only brought Suharto to power but resulted in the deaths of as many as half a million communists and communist sympathizers and their families (most of them Indonesians of Chinese heritage). Communist movements were similarly suppressed, often brutally, in Malaysia and Singapore. Communist parties were banned in all three countries and in the Philippines, which is still waging a rural guerrilla war against a nominally communist insurgency, the New People's Army. Explicitly anticommunist laws remain on the books in several Southeast Asian countries, and the specter of communism has been evoked and at times exaggerated to justify the continuance of internal-security laws and other political controls.<sup>16</sup>

In sum, history and geography offer alternative, and possibly more convincing, path-dependent explanations for the current distribution of democracy and autocracy across Southeast Asia than conventional political science can provide. Southeast Asia's mainland states, particularly those nearest China, were the subject of repeated demands for tribute in the precolonial era, and have received consistent support from China for their nondemocratic political models in the postcolonial era. This support helps to explain their resilience today. By contrast, more distant maritime states like the present-day democracies of Indonesia and the Philippines were much less subject to historical demands for tribute, much less willing to accept Chinese hegemony in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and violently resisted communist movements in the postwar period. Understanding the interplay of history and geography is thus critical to understanding the contemporary contours of democracy and its alternatives in Southeast Asia, and helps to explain what democratic theory cannot.

## NOTES

1. The classic work on the relationship between democracy and development is Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy," *American Political Sci-*

ence Review 53 (March 1959): 69–105. For a more recent analysis, see Adam Przeworski et al., *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950–1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

2. Larry Diamond, “China and East Asian Democracy: The Coming Wave,” *Journal of Democracy* 23 (January 2012): 7.

3. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

4. Brian Joseph and Min Zin, “The Opening in Burma: The Democrats’ Opportunity,” *Journal of Democracy* 23 (October 2012): 104–19.

5. As Freedom House explains in its “Freedom in the World” survey for 2012: “Freedom House’s term ‘electoral democracy’ differs from ‘liberal democracy’ in that the latter also implies the presence of a substantial array of civil liberties. In the survey, all Free countries qualify as both electoral and liberal democracies. By contrast, some Partly Free countries qualify as electoral, but not liberal, democracies.” See [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org).

6. For an outstanding synthesis of scholarship on relations between China and Southeast Asia, see Martin Stuart-Fox, *A Short History of China and Southeast Asia: Tribute, Trade and Influence* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2003).

7. Stuart-Fox, *Short History*, 75.

8. Stuart-Fox, *Short History*, 80.

9. Alice D. Ba, “A New History? The Structure and Process of Southeast Asia’s Relations with a Rising China,” in Mark Beeson, ed., *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2009), 193.

10. See Martin Gainsborough, “Southeast Asia: Elites vs. Reform in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam,” *Journal of Democracy* 23 (April 2012): 34–46.

11. Stuart-Fox, *Short History*, 122.

12. Ba, “A New History?” 193.

13. Carlyle A. Thayer, “Comrade Plus Brother: The New Sino-Vietnamese Relations,” *Pacific Review* 5, no. 4 (1992): 402.

14. Ba, “A New History?” 193.

15. Stuart-Fox, *Short History*, 238.

16. Justus M. van der Kroef, *Communism in South-East Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).