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Introduction

Elections and politics in Southeast Asia

R. H. TAYLOR

"General elections," wrote Sir Lewis Namier, "are the locks on the stream of British democracy, controlling the flow of the river and its traffic." His point can be generalized to the histories of all Western democratic nations. In each country's elections those who seek to direct its public affairs must defend their records and convince the voters that the policies they propose for the future are feasible, desirable, and best carried out by those who propose them. The office seekers try to show that their opponents' policies are ill conceived and that their past failures in office make them poor bets for managing the government in the future. The voters consider the competing cases and make their decisions. Their votes are cast and counted, the candidates elected take office, and a new government is formed or an existing one renewed.[1]

The moment the election was called it was every man for himself. The by-election had been a spectacle, a sort of one-day cricket match where the nation watched from the pavilion. Now the match was everywhere, and in that action-stations mood anything went. The Election Commission, that genteel cricket board, watched helplessly as government vehicles were used for campaigning, vats of election hooch were brewed, and rival goonda gangs fought pitched battles. In this electoral match it was the sponsors who won, whatever the scoreboard might read at the end of the day. The winners strode the field, but afterwards they championed their paymasters. We who queued at the ticket booths simply went home to our lives. In the end I found that politics *was* a game—a party game—but business was in earnest. Who paid the piper called the tune. The general election was a mass forgetting of this simple law, a willing suspension of healthy disbelief.[2]

[1]David Butler, Howard R. Penniman, and Austin Ranney, "Introduction: Democratic and Nondemocratic Elections" in David Butler et al., eds., *Democracy at the Polls: A Comparative Study of Competitive National Elections* (Washington: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1981), 1. The quotation comes from Sir Lewis Namier, *Avenue of History* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1952), 183.
[2]I. Allan Sealy, *Hero* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1990), 231–2.

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These two quotations provide us with starkly contrasting views of the same modern and now nearly universal phenomenon: "national" or general elections. The first, in the language of political science, states what an election is, as conceived in formal democratic theory as developed from British historical experience.[3] The second, in the language of an Indian novelist, provides an alternative description of the same phenomenon: one that points to a range of electoral purposes that have nothing to do with the rational choice of the individual citizen implicit in the first. How can we account for the difference? Neither statement fully matches what little we know of elections in Southeast Asia. What does the historical experience of politics in that region show about the nature of elections when examined against these alternatives?

FUNCTIONS OF ELECTIONS

The issues raised by the role and functions of elections in society are of interest not only for theoretical reasons but also because policymakers, Western governments, and much world opinion currently hold that democratic elections are the sine qua non of good government. This perception is often based on contradictory assumptions and rarely on empirical observation. More often it is premised on theoretical or ideologically based preconceptions or expectations and desires.[4]

The current debates in Southeast Asian studies, similar to arguments advanced in relation to Latin America, Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union, as to whether economic development and changing class structures in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and the Philippines, centering on the rise of both independent capital and an emerging business- and consumer-oriented middle class, must lead to the development of less authoritarian polities rarely, if ever, consider the role of

[3]Curiously, though the volume from which this quotation comes is a study of elections in 28 countries including India, Israel, Japan, Sri Lanka, and Turkey, the authors refer to democracy as only part of the "histories of all *Western* democratic nations." Emphasis added.

[4]Murray Edelman is instructive on this point: "The conspicuous scheduling of an election in a third world country known for its despotic rule is accepted as evidence of a turn toward democracy. Political maneuver thrives upon publicized actions that mean less than meets the eye. A closely related gesture entails the presentation of a development that benefits a particular group as one that serves everyone." Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 24–5.

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the central formal institution of democratic government, namely, elections.[5] Conversely, the largely unquestioned thesis of most Western observers of the struggle for economic reform in Vietnam and Burma/Myanmar inevitably links the holding of "free and fair elections" and the creation of a pluralist democratic system of government as a necessary, if not a prerequisite, condition for successful and lasting economic reform.

These contradictory analyses of the relative importance of formal elections in relation to the formation of liberal polities and economic development fail to acknowledge how, in practice, elections have been a regular feature of Southeast Asian politics since the 1940s and, in some cases, earlier. But here another paradox arises. With the partial exception of the Philippines prior to Marcos's declaration of martial law in 1972, and the 1975 and 1995 parliamentary elections in Thailand, elections for presidents or legislatures have never directly caused a change of government. Nor has any incumbent party ever lost a referendum or plebiscite. So why do Southeast Asian governments bother to hold elections? What functions and whose interests do they serve?

UNEXAMINED ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE ROLE OF ELECTIONS

The conventional answers to these questions usually take one of the following forms: (1) Elections are essential legitimizing acts in the eyes of capitalist democracies with aid to dispense, which for reasons of their own domestic politics and personal ideals wish to be seen assisting fellow, or at least struggling, democracies. (2) Elections were accepted by the Westernized nationalist leaders of postindependence states as modern and were often required by the withdrawing colonial power. (3) Popular doctrine and opinion in nationalist movements explicitly articulated a view that independence meant government by the people, or democracy, and elites shared this view. (4) Elections were seen, as in democratic theory, as a way of allowing the expression of diverse, but not ultimately destructive or confrontational, interests and cultures in pluralistic societies, preserving the rights of minorities while championing the power of the majority. These points, all derived from formal theories of democracy, seem irrele-

[5]See, for example, the discussion in Richard Tanter and Kenneth Young, eds., *The Politics of Middle Class Indonesia* (Clayton, Victoria: Monash Papers on Southeast Asia No. 19, 1990).

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vant to the actual practice of domestic politics when occasionally mentioned in most of the literature on politics in Southeast Asia.[6]

Despite the ineluctably authoritarian caste to Indonesian, Thai, Burmese, Vietnamese, Malaysian, Singaporean, and Filipino politics now and during most of the past four decades and longer, no governing elite has ever abandoned the idea of elections. Elections have been held regularly, and few leaders have attempted to adopt the fascist pose of the people's leader through undetermined will. Not only are elections held, but they are taken seriously. Massive amounts of money are spent mobilizing voters and organizing polls. The loss of one or two seats to the opposition, where an opposition exists, results in pages of analysis and predictions of doom by the ruling group, when it is obvious to all that the election outcome has not shaken the formal position of the ruling authorities one iota.[7]

[6]Herbert Feith makes clear in *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), 38–45, how central but inchoate the idea of democracy was in Indonesian nationalist thought. A recent American college text, Clark D. Neher, *Southeast Asia in the New International Era* (Boulder: Westview, 1991), omits "elections" from its index, though "democratization" gets a mention. A recent volume in the growing literature on democracy in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, Larry Diamond, Juan J. Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds., *Democracy in Developing Countries: Asia* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner; London: Adamantine, 1989), contains two excellent accounts of the ways in which theory and practice diverge in the region. See Chai-Anan Samudavanija, "Thailand: A Stable Semi-Democracy," 305–46, and Zakaria Haji Ahmad, "Malaysia: Quasi Democracy in a Divided Society," 347–82.

[7]Examples of these points are plentiful. Observe the behavior of Lee Kuan Yew after losing one or two seats to the opposition in Singapore. Or of his successor following the August 31, 1991, Singapore elections. The stage-managed campaigning and near certainty of result of Indonesian elections have often been commented on. Like De Gaulle, former Thai Prime Minister Prem used to threaten an election if he did not get his way in parliament, curious behavior for a man who respected the will of the people as expressed by their democratically elected representatives. The consequences of the February 23, 1991, coup in Thailand, with the coup group's initial promise of elections in six months, indicates that Prem is not the only Thai who views elections as not the central institution of politics but still insists upon them. Mahathir and the United Malays National Organization almost seem to dare the electorate to vote for the opposition. And in Burma, the army in 1990 held an election widely seen as the "free-est and fairest" in the country's history, declared it a success, and spent the next five years making certain that the elected representatives did not meet to form a government—in the name of democracy.

Edelman's observations about electoral practices and the generation of an opposition are instructive. "The effective gesture of creating difference is the constitution of opposition for an incumbent or aspiring leader. There is always a rival who represents a choice, an alternative course for the polity. Even in one-party states and totalitarian states where opposition is prohibited, the leader keeps constantly before the public an evocation of an alternative that has allegedly brought disaster in the past or promises to do so in the future. Political oppositions create each other by invoking the differences between them. Construction of symbols of that difference inevitably follows and helps reify the alternative. "A somewhat similar contradiction holds where there are deep ideological differences, as in

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If elections in Southeast Asia have not fulfilled the functions required of them in formal democratic theory, why have electorates turned out in large numbers on polling days to cast their ballots after following the campaigns and their personalities with apparent interest?[8] Being involved in the process of governance, even if vicariously, might be one explanation. The prospect of reward for backing the winner might be another. Also, patron-client relationships, administrative pressures, corporatist-like desires for organizational solidarity and control, and similar inducements may be present.[9]

Related to the question of what elections do are issues arising from other formal democratic institutions, such as parliaments and constitutions. If constitutions are not documents revered and adhered to despite the consequences for the rulers but, rather, formally or, more often informally, altered and amended to fit their momentary requirements, why bother to have them? Similarly, the legislature is, after all, from the point of view of the ruler, largely an expensive nuisance that must be kept in check to forestall any political threat to his or her power. Since few legislatures in Southeast Asia, again with the exception of the Philippines, have actually ever proposed, let alone passed, any program or policy contrary to the wishes of the head of government or state, why bother?

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRACY

Clearly, elections are important but perhaps for reasons different from those asserted in formal democratic theory. It may be that Namier's "*locks* on the stream of democracy" might have a different meaning in the context of contemporary political practice. The legitimacy that the

the case of leaders of democracies who define themselves in terms of their differences from leaders of dictatorships or from their radical critics. Here the very intensity of the focus upon opposition induces antagonists to act in ways that emulate the other. Democratic leaders become so preoccupied with talk of subversion or invasion that they place a higher priority upon security and regimentation than upon civil rights and public participation. By the same token, despotic leaders worry about the attraction of foreign ideologies and so claim they are building 'true' democracies and may establish a facade of democratic procedures." Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, 49–50.

[8]See the discussion of one such campaign in John Pemberton, "Notes on the 1982 General Election in Solo," *Indonesia* 41 (April 1986): 1–22.

[9]These explanations are similar to those given in the second quotation from the Indian novelist: the involvement of money, the joy of participation, and the suspension of belief, none of which is accounted for in formal theory.

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electoral process, as well as electoral victory, provides ruling elites would seem to be obvious. But when electorates are aware of manipulated campaign procedures, when law and practice do not provide a level playing field but, rather, distort the process strongly in favor of the incumbents, what kind of legitimacy is created?[10] The electoral process does carry within it the promise of popular control of the state. Will the continued practice of elections eventually change a state's nature and make it genuinely open to contests of the kind postulated by formal theory? If this is too much to hope for, might they not at least lead to the emergence of regimes more attentive to the rights and views of citizens? Or to the emergence of citizens who will demand their democratic rights against authoritarian rulers?

Questions such as these obviously arise when we begin to think about the role of elections in Southeast Asian polities. Others also become apparent, such as those of the relation between elections and the types of authoritarian regimes that exist, the nature of party systems, and the relative levels of economic development that exist among the region's polities. It is often postulated that a high level of economic development is a prerequisite for the holding of democratic elections. That proposition needs to be tested by examining whether there is any correlation between economic structure or wealth and electoral behavior in the region. But these questions may obscure the possibility that elections are held to ensure a sense of powerlessness on the part of the electorate.[11]

The generalized nature of patron-client relations throughout Southeast Asia poses a comparative point of departure for electoral studies and

[10]James C. Scott notes the call for election boycott as a means of denying the legitimacy of the electoral process and of a regime when an opposition believes an election to be fraudulent or meaningless. (*Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990], 46.) Though election boycott was frequently advocated in colonial Burma, it does not seem to have been advocated successfully in postcolonial Southeast Asia.

[11]"Audience interpretations of the spectacle are manifestly constrained in some measure by what is reported, what is omitted and, perhaps more fundamentally, by the implications in news reports respecting limits upon the ability of citizens to influence policy. In subtle ways the public is constantly reminded that its role is minor, largely passive, and at most reactive. The intense publicity given to voting and elections is itself a potent signal of the essential powerlessness of political spectators because elections are implicity a message about the *limits* of power. Everyone who grows up in our society is bound to become aware, at some level of consciousness, that an individual vote is more nearly a form of self-expression and of legitimation than of influence and that the link between elections and value allocations is tenuous. The reiteration in patriotic oratory and grade school civics lessons that people control the government comes to be recognized as a way of insuring support for government actions people dislike and over which they exercise no effective control." Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, 97.

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democratic theory based on the experience of North American and European industrial democracies. Although elections may be exercises in creating national solidarity and social inclusion, as well as opportunities for civic education, the liberal sociological assumptions of such contentions stand in contrast to the historically postulated, organic nature of patron-clientalist Southeast Asian societies. Although the electoral act holds up the principle of atomized individual free choice in politics, as the market does in economics, this might actually destabilize, rather than reinforce, the existing social order, at least from the perspectives of dominant elites.

THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ELECTIONS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The questions one can ask about elections are universal, not specific to Southeast Asia. The regional cases included in this volume are part of a global phenomenon, now nearly universal, and integral to the nature of the modern secular constitutional republic. Much of what we say about elections in Southeast Asia must therefore apply to what we say about elections in Europe, America, and the remainder of the globe. The essays brought together here are attempts to answer some of the questions raised about the role of elections in modern politics.[12] A number of conclusions emerge from these analyses.

First, and perhaps most important, given the contingent nature of electoral politics in any society, is the fact that the nature of the first election of a prolonged series establishes the ground rules for the conduct of subsequent "national-level" politics. All of the authors, but particularly Benedict R. Anderson in his opening comparative essay, make clear that having access to government and being acceptable to those already in power is essential not only for believing in the legitimacy of electoral

[12]The essays were originally presented as papers at a conference organized at the Woodrow Wilson Center in conjunction with the Southeast Asia Committee of the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies in September 1993. In addition to the papers reprinted here, contributions were also received from Alexander R. Magno, University of the Philippines; Sudipta Kaviraj, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London; and John Dunn, University of Cambridge. Their contributions were especially important in broadening the discussion in order to understand more fully the role of elections historically and analytically. Since the conference was held, elections have taken place in Thailand, the Philippines, and Malaysia. The results of those exercises further confirm the conclusions reached in the papers.

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politics but also for having any chance of gaining power through the ballot box.

This fact leads to a corollary: Elections are double-edged weapons in the rise of democracy and in the formation of a dominant, stable, and permanent political order. On the one hand, they are pacifying instruments. They are often means of depoliticizing populations, limiting the politically possible to formalized campaigns and episodic voting opportunities. This usually follows the elimination of the left or other groups unwilling to accept a secular republican definition of the modern political world. On the other hand, in circumstances where narrow, aging, ineffectual regimes have effectively lost touch with, or alienated, the bulk of the population, elections can provide a lever for prying open and widening the sphere of legitimate political activity by demonstrating the illegitimacy of the old regime. The essay on Burma illustrates this point. It remains to be demonstrated, however, whether such elections provide an opportunity for genuinely new groups to enter politics or are merely the means by which a faction that previously lost influence within the regime can regain influence or control.

This difference in perspective is related in part to how one views an election. As political phenomena, elections can look different from the perspective of those in power at the top and those with little or no power at the bottom of a polity. Elections hold out a threat and an opportunity to both these groups; their effectiveness in the eyes of both is a function of whether they succeed in pacifying or not. The degree to which the electoral process is perceived to be fair and honest has a bearing here. How fraudulent does an electoral process have to be before it denies legitimacy? Garry Rodan's discussion of electoral politics in Singapore, as well as R. William Liddle's analysis of the bases of electoral legitimacy in Indonesia and Jomo K. S.'s of the role of money in Malaysia, is instructive on this point.

In order to understand the meaning and role of elections in any society, one needs to contextualize the election process. Elections have meaning only within a particular historical space and time, and to see them outside their context is to deny them any significant meaning. Discovering the meaning of elections is a genuine comparative project. Suchit Bunbongkarn's and Anek Laothamatas's essays on contemporary interpretations of democracy and elections in Thailand illustrate dramatically how the meaning and role of elections can be interpreted differently by different social groups in the same political structures—with

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potentially disastrous implications for the stability of elected regimes. But, as Harold Crouch argues about Malaysia, elections can also ensure that regimes remain responsive to the changing perceptions of significant social groups.

Elections in Southeast Asia, as in most of the Asian and African world, have accompanied, rather than been a consequence of, the rise of the modern bureaucratic state, the idea of the nation, capitalism, and industrialization as happened historically in Europe and North America. Therefore, the "burden" elections are expected to carry in Southeast Asian history is much greater than in European and American history. This is an essential point about the context of elections in the region. Elections in Southeast Asia also developed when several models of electoral life were available—American two-party presidential, Soviet one-party communist, European multiparty parliamentary.

All the studies in this volume concentrate on real or state-managed two- or multiparty electoral processes, like those we think we are familiar with in North America and Europe. Excluded from consideration here is the study of the role and meaning of elections in Vietnam, where the Communist Party has held up an alternative model of electoral politics that fundamentally denies the legitimacy of multiparty politics. This reminds us that the acceptance of the concept of electoral competition carries with it a large number of assumptions about the nature of society and how it should be organized for life, production, and consumption.

The concept of an election is essentially an individualizing notion. It assumes that various class, status, and other social identities and forms of action are less real and significant in political life than many people believe. Elections require people to think of themselves as momentarily atomized, if only during the time they are in the voting booth. The concept of individual choice in the ballot box, however, often flies in the face of political realities outside it, where job, family, security, socialized beliefs, or other factors impinge on perceptions of political choice.

There is what can be described as a "teleological pull" to elections and all that goes with them. It is difficult to imagine the present world without elections, because they combine so many aspects of modern notions of political life, even in the face of many other political, social, and economic realities. We all read about elections in other countries in our daily papers. As Kate G. Frieson writes in her essay on Cambodia, when the United Nations sought to establish peace in that war-torn and frac-

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tured society, the primary vehicle it could imagine to use for that purpose was an election. But as she shows, to many Cambodians that process carried a number of meanings other than, and perhaps contrary to, those intended in New York.

Elections in Southeast Asia and the rest of Asia and Africa are not indigenous. Although there may be some historical evidence of lots cast three thousand years ago in Asia Minor, this hardly measures in anyone's memory. How are elections indigenized? Or are they? Is the indigenization process part of the defanging of the potential empowerment of people held out by the notion of elections? "We do this thing this way here and always have, so shut up" is the answer often given to those who raise doubts about the appropriateness of prevailing political patterns.

In their ideal form, elections are means of resolving political conflicts without resorting to physical force. But they may be merely masks for coercion that is occurring or has taken place in a different context or a different time. In societies with intense levels of conflict, elections are probably meaningless because the fundamental conflict will be over what the election is about or who it is for, not who will win a particular race. Those able to participate hold out elections as acts of legitimacy; those who are denied or reject participation argue for their illegitimacy. But that is a political choice in itself, as Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet notes in his discussion of the long history of electoral politics in the Philippines.

The current advocacy of elections as the sine qua non of democratic politics and good government needs to be examined in terms of who is expected to be the victors in these contests and which contests will be recognized as genuine. Elections are institutions that can encourage change in social attitudes by destroying patterns of deference and forcing elites to recognize the legitimacy of a "loyal" opposition. Both these processes individualize society while leveling political forces as they are brought into the legitimate, permitted sphere of political action. In the same way, elections cause affirmation of an identity people may not feel. The contest defines the players themselves and in relation to the other participants in the election.

Studied systemically in their specific and their universal circumstances, elections in Southeast Asia clarify important aspects of political, economic, and social change in the region. No longer able to legitimate themselves through claims of birth or right through might, ruling elites have found they must concede the importance of elections. New social

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