Understanding political change in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia is a vast region, comprised of eleven countries and incredible diversity. From one country to the next, dominant languages vary, religious groups are different and histories are all dissimilar from one another. In comparison to Latin America or Africa – other large regions of the world – the study of politics in Southeast Asia can be particularly challenging.

Latin America and Africa are also very diverse regions but their respective countries share some similarities that make comparisons somewhat more common. The Spanish language, for instance, binds countries of Latin America where it is dominant in all countries except Brazil. Countries of the region were all colonized, and Spain was the dominant power for several centuries. Latin American countries inherited societies in which descendants of Spanish colonizers and mestizo (mixed) classes are now dominant. These common characteristics often tainted their style of politics, with some very interesting parallels among several countries. To a lesser extent, the African experience also generated similarities that have been compared analytically. In Africa, the division of the continent between mostly French and British colonial rule\(^1\) created some homogenizing experiences as well. French and English became common languages of communication throughout West and East/Southern Africa respectively. Colonization by these powers, which imposed bureaucratic structures over societies mostly organized in small political units, created some similar dysfunctionalities that have persisted in the modern independent states (Mamdani, 1996; Young, 1994). Comparisons have often been made between clusters of African countries, where the continued legacies of colonial rule have been blamed for the inability of states to overcome poverty and other major challenges in the continent.

\(^1\) While most of the continent was divided up between Britain and France, a few other European countries gained some colonial presence, such as Portugal, Belgium and Germany.
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By contrast, Southeast Asia’s diversity makes comparison and large generalizations about the region less frequent. Although interactions among peoples stretch back hundreds of years, and cross-cultural influences have left their trace in every country, the region never developed a common language or a common cultural heritage (Lieberman, 2003; Reid, 1988). Several major religions took root. Hindu beliefs spread from India to the archipelagic Southeast Asia, and became widespread among the Javanese and other peoples. Hinduism left its trace in such temples as Prambanan in Java. Theravada Buddhism became a dominant religion in vast areas of continental Southeast Asia, comprising today’s Thailand, Cambodia and Laos in particular. Islam, which again came from South Asia, spread through merchants and scholars who travelled to coastal areas. Conversions and the establishment of sultanes displaced Hinduism and Buddhism across the Southeast Asian archipelago, leaving only traces of believers in such places as Bali and the Tengger highlands of Java. Today’s Indonesia and Malaysia are predominantly Muslim.

The region was also divided up between several colonial powers, with consequently different effects on the subregions under their respective control. The extent of penetration of colonial rule varied considerably, thereby affecting local political structures in varying ways. Local languages remained dominant, while colonial languages only briefly became the lingua franca. Although some languages eventually superseded others to bind several peoples together and be later elevated as “national” languages, no one language established itself as a regional medium of communication. This prevented the kind of similarity of experience and common trajectories found in some parts of Latin America and Africa.

European colonialism and its influence

When Europeans first reached the archipelago in the sixteenth century, they found well-established societies, solid trading networks and strong kingdoms. For the most part, Europeans came to the region in search of commodities. Markets for exotic spices were rapidly expanding in Europe and entrepreneurial merchants sought new means of profiting from the spice trade. Portuguese merchants created a first trading post at Malacca, which was strategically positioned on the coast that overlooked one of the busiest sea trading routes. They competed with local
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merchants to seize control over trade in some of the more profitable spices. They set up more trading posts along coastal areas but often clashed with local traders.

Asia was a very dynamic place with advanced civilizations, complex cultures and societies, as well as sophisticated bureaucratic systems, that had been established well before there was much contact with Europe. Yet, it was not isolated. Traders, adventurers and conquerors criss-crossed Asia from the Indian subcontinent to the eastern tip of today’s China. With human flows also came the transmission of ideas, such as new religious beliefs. Links also stretched to the Roman Empire and different parts of today’s Europe.

Political organization was vastly different from one location to the next. Most prominently, successive Han and Mongul dynasties controlled vast areas of Eastern Asia, spreading their political and cultural influences over neighbouring areas of today’s Southeast Asia. After Qin Shi Huangdi created the Chinese empire in 221–210 BC, the Chinese state became highly centralized and bureaucratized, as its influence expanded over the following centuries. Smaller surrounding kingdoms, such as the Viet or Korean kingdoms absorbed some of the Chinese cultural influences, while struggling to maintain their independence. In much of Southeast Asia, polities were a great deal smaller, and tended to change regularly. According to Lieberman, from the fourteenth century onwards, mainland Southeast Asia did see a greater consolidation over time, but archipelagic Southeast Asia remained more fluid. Some kingdoms were formed in parts of today’s Java, Bali, Maluku, and Cambodia, for instance, but they were held together often by kinship and religious ties rather than bureaucratic structure or territorial control (Lieberman, 2003). The bases, scale and types of political organization were therefore different across the region, and so were the modalities of legitimacy.

Colonialism set a new course and began to transform this diverse landscape, through integrative and administrative changes that would eventually give way to the emergence of modern states. European influences deeply affected many societies, including their culture and modes of social organization. Politically, colonialism introduced modern forms of warfare, fostered a rapid and deeper integration to world markets, set new and more fixed boundaries and imposed new forms of administrative and political organization. As the historian Anthony Reid has noted, this “imperial alchemy” mixed with a varied landscape.
of diverse societies and cultures to produce new political forms (Reid, 2010).

Resistance to colonial rule eventually latched onto global political trends as well. The flipside of colonialism’s transformative power is the history of popular discontent, resistance and rebellion against European intrusion. Where European powers encountered well-established kingdoms, sometimes military force was the only means by which to subjugate local populations. Muslims in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago (in today’s Southern Philippines), for instance, militarily resisted Spanish conquest. So did the Acehnese against the Dutch colonial army’s attempts to gain full control over the territory representing today’s Indonesia. Once consolidated, colonial regimes encountered this type of large and small-scale resistance. Millenarian movements were large-scale peasant rebellions that were mobilized by leaders who were seen almost as prophets or messiahs offering more prosperous and better futures. The Java War of 1825–30, led by Prince Diponegoro in the Dutch East Indies, as well as the Saya San Rebellion of 1930–2 in British Burma both had this character (Adas, 1979). At other times, peasants rebelled in smaller, less visible groups, in villages or more contained locations. James C. Scott wrote about peasant rebellion under colonial rule. He explains how the colonial economy threatened the norms and moral codes of conduct in peasant societies. Peasants rebelled when redistributive norms and survival strategies came under intense pressure from colonial transformation, thereby violating the “moral economy” of the peasants (Scott, 1976). While they might join larger-scale rebellious movements, they could also adopt “everyday forms of resistance”, which are individual acts of resistance, often hidden, targeted at local landowners or authority figures (Scott, 1985). By the beginning of the twentieth century, new ideologies and models of political organization emerged globally. They inspired and channeled rebellions into more organized, more modern forms of resistance, such as nationalist and communist movements.

European encounters

Southeast Asian countries were colonized by several different European powers: Portuguese, Dutch, British, French and Spanish conquered different parts of the region, more or less intensively, and with a varied
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set of goals. Not only did their approach to colonialism vary but, given the wide variety of political, social and cultural contexts, the outcomes of colonialism remained quite diverse as well.

At the outset, Europeans came mainly to establish trading posts, and only much later intensified their involvement. The Portuguese first established a trading post at Malacca in 1511. As with their successors, the Portuguese were lured by spices. While they displaced Arab and Indian Muslim merchants in the Strait of Malacca, they vied mainly for the spice rich Moluccan Islands (present day Maluku). They established forts and trading posts in several locations across the Moluccas, while largely ignoring mainland Southeast Asia. Several local populations and traders later came to resent the Portuguese as they imposed high tariffs and port fees on non-Portuguese merchants who used the Strait of Malacca. Furthermore, Portuguese missionization and attacks against Muslim merchants further irritated mainly Muslim local populations.

Local populations therefore welcomed the advent of the Dutch who easily replaced the Portuguese’s waning influence. When the Spanish and Portuguese crowns were combined between 1580 and 1640, the Portuguese section of the empire was largely neglected, thereby allowing the Dutch to establish their supremacy. They also came for the rising profit in the spice trade; the Dutch established a strong footing in the Moluccas, where spice production had continued to rise. Initially, the Dutch were uninterested in either proselytizing or gaining territorial control. As trade was their main interest, they preferred to work with local rulers who maintained their administrative power. The Dutch East India Company, which was the principal Dutch presence in the archipelago, therefore expanded its reach over the densely populated island of Java, as well as the Moluccas and a few other areas, primarily through mutually beneficial agreements to preserve local rulers’ power as long as they protected and promoted Dutch trading interests.

In the nineteenth century, Dutch control intensified as new commodities became profitable. In addition to spices, coffee, sugar and indigo also became important. In some areas, the Dutch imposed more direct political control as they established plantations. In others, such as Java, under a system known as the Cultivation System, they forced smallholders to use a portion of their land for export crops. When the Dutch East India Company faltered, the Dutch government became
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more heavily involved, and some areas of the archipelago were placed under direct rule or more intense Dutch political interference.

The British entered the Malay Archipelago and challenged Dutch control of the Strait of Malacca. In 1819, they gained control of the tiny island of Singapore and proceeded in the following decades to transform it into an important trading post for the region. They also occupied Malacca and Penang, which together became known as the Straits Settlements in 1826. As with the Dutch, the British were interested in trade, so they only reluctantly became more involved in the surrounding Malay states. Nevertheless, as their interest in producing oil palm, tin and rubber expanded, they also established more formal control over Malay sultanates to protect their trading interests and maintain political stability.

Meanwhile, the British transformed Malay society by encouraging large numbers of Chinese and Indians to migrate to their colony. In the 1870s, they expanded their colonial venture into tin-mining areas where Chinese migrants constituted the largest pool of mining workers. Two decades later, they began to establish large rubber plantations, which also attracted Chinese labour as well as Indians. The scale of migration radically altered the demographic landscape of what became British Malaya, as the Chinese represented almost 40 per cent and Indians almost 10 per cent of the population by the middle of the twentieth century. This population change constituted one of the most significant effects of colonialism in the region.

Mainland Southeast Asia became the locus of increasing expansion of British and French colonial powers. For the British, who had occupied India in the eighteenth century, the expansion into Burma initially served primarily as a buffer to protect its crown jewel. Viewing the Burmese kingdom in the same way as they did the princely kingdoms of India, the British sought to impose their dominance. Several treaties failed to give the British the security they needed for their interests in India, as the French expanded their control and Burmese kings refused to recognize British power. It took three Anglo-Burmese wars before the British finally seized control over Burma in 1886.

The French had come late to the region. In the seventeenth century, some missionaries proselytized in Vietnam and, when they were persecuted, sought refuge and established relationships with the Thai kingdom of Ayutthaya. Trade, however, remained minimal as the Dutch successfully contained French attempts to make inroads on the
mainland and French kings were not all equally interested in colonial expansion in the region. Nevertheless, by the mid nineteenth century French imperialism intensified. Under Napoleon III, imperial conquest was sought as a source of power and prestige. Vietnam became particularly attractive with increasing opportunities to trade with the south of China. By establishing a base in Saigon, the French intended to compete in this respect with Hong Kong and Singapore. At the same time, despite massive conversions to Catholicism from the last two hundred years of French missionization, threats against missionaries were frequently made. Although reports of persecution were exaggerated, the French state nevertheless used this reason to launch its conquest of Cochinchina in the south of Vietnam and, from there, the entire Mekong Delta.

After their success in 1862, the French continued to expand. For two centuries, Khmer monarchs had been weak. Their more powerful Thai and Vietnamese neighbours repeatedly threatened them. They fell at times under the influence of one or the other, and very briefly protected some of their autonomy by paying tribute to both. By the mid nineteenth century, the Vietnamese and Thai states had been strongly consolidated. Armed clashes occurred on Cambodian territory, leading to much suffering of the Khmer people as well as the seizure of significant portions of the previous Khmer territories. When King Ang Duong sought assistance from Napoleon III in 1853, he could not envision that the French already planned to conquer significant portions of Vietnam. After the French victory in 1862, King Norodom – Ang Duong’s successor – accepted Cambodia being turned into a French protectorate. Once Cambodia was secured, the French then eventually further expanded into the Vietnamese provinces of Annam and Tonkin, thereby gaining full control by 1885.

The Spanish came to the region as early as the sixteenth century. In contrast to other European powers, the Spanish crown strongly supported missionization. In the central and northern parts of the Philippines, local inhabitants followed a variety of animist beliefs. With less hierarchical and organized religion, missionaries converted them to Christianity more successfully than elsewhere in the region. Yet, in the south, the spread of Islam across the Malay world had reached the island of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago. Moros (Muslims of the southern Philippines) strongly resisted missionization efforts as well as the Spanish conquest. As a result, even though the Spanish had
already established a foothold in Manila by 1571, they were only able to defeat the Moros in 1830.

There were few economic incentives for colonizing the Philippines. Having learned from their mistakes in Latin America, where vast numbers of the population died from disease and mistreatment, Spanish colonial rulers prevented Spaniards from living outside the city, and prohibited intensive exploitation of labour in mines or plantations, which had led to huge population losses in Latin America. In the first few years, they conceded a few royal grants to Spaniards, thereby allotting them administrative control over groups of villages in return for Christianizing them and providing employment for the local population. Otherwise, many others worked on friar estates that were mostly granted to Filipino mestizos (mixed local and Spanish). Overall, Spanish colonial rule did not significantly transform the local economy until well into the nineteenth century.

Therefore the effect of colonialism in Southeast Asia was profound but very uneven. While some regions were highly influenced by intensive colonial presence, others were barely touched. Economic, political and social transformation left the region with a strong European imprint and laid the basis for the current configuration and character of modern states.

Colonial ventures displaced and transformed local economic networks that already had a global reach. Strong trade networks existed well before colonial times. They connected India to China, and overland routes reached Europe; the appeal of spices from Asia was introduced through these networks. The Portuguese, British and Dutch essentially created competing maritime routes. Over time, their superior maritime power ensured dominance over trade routes. Some land areas, where production of coffee, sugar, rubber, tin, oil palm and other commodities became highly profitable, were transformed systematically to use local agricultural labour and integrate it into colonial priorities. In Java, landholdings remained relatively intact but productivity remained highly contained under the Cultivation System that imposed strict production quotas to the benefit of the Dutch. In British Malaya and parts of Sumatra, however, some areas were converted to plantations, which hired agricultural workers. In the Philippines, perhaps more than elsewhere, large-scale plantation agriculture emerged, later to be seized by a growing Filipino mestizo elite. These transformations created some dependency on external markets for cash crops, and determined to a large extent where small-scale, subsistence
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farming remained and where agricultural labour depended more extensively on large-scale plantation farming linked to global markets.

Economic transformation under colonial rule accelerated migration that was already driven by a number of push factors in the countries of origin. Most notably, deteriorating economic and social conditions in China motivated many poor Chinese to seek better livelihoods in Southeast Asia. Migration to Siam, the Philippines, British Malaya, Singapore and the Dutch East Indies was already significant in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Most migrants tended to marry locally and mix. In the Philippines, the Chinese population rose from 6,000 in 1840 to 100,000 by 1890 but many would become mestizos and eventually be simply considered Filipinos (Tarling, 1992). Migration to Siam was similarly strong, and migrants tended to integrate relatively well into the local population. This was also the case for initial waves of migrants integrating into the Dutch East Indies and Malaya. By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, and partly as a result of the scale of migration and colonial policies and practices, migrants tended to form their own, separate communities. By the early 1820s, the Chinese population in West Borneo already reached around 50,000. As mentioned earlier, Chinese migrants came in much larger numbers to Malaya and Singapore after the 1870s as labourers in rapidly expanding commercial ventures. Indians also came in large numbers so that their respective proportion of the population of both colonies was very high. In Singapore, Chinese settlers became the vast majority. While in colonies such as Burma or the Dutch East Indies, where the proportion of Indians or Chinese migrants remained relatively low, they nevertheless came to occupy significant niches in the colonial economy, as laborers, moneylenders and traders. These changes prompted the scholar and colonial administrator J. S. Furnivall to observe the formation of “plural societies”, by which Europeans, Chinese, Indians and “natives” lived in separate communities, with their distinct religions, languages, and even occupations. This separation, which was a marked departure from earlier mixing between migrants and local populations, had lasting effects in modern Indonesia, Malaysia and Burma/Myanmar, where Chinese and Indian

2 The SLORC regime in 1989 changed the English reference to the country from Burma to Myanmar, as the latter was closer to its form in the Burmese language. Several sources continued to use “Burma” after 1989 as the SLORC regime was highly contested and criticized as illegitimate, particularly after its
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communities were subjected to discriminatory policies and largely failed, or were prevented, from integrating even after independence (Furnivall, 1948).

Politically, European colonialism created new states, new identities, and transformed existing political structures. Most dramatically, Dutch and Spanish colonial administration over the Malay and Philippine archipelagos created administrative boundaries, centralized state control where only loose and mainly local political structures prevailed, and laid the basis for new identities to emerge. Modern states of Indonesia and the Philippines were created out of the Dutch and Spanish colonies respectively. Malaysia became its own state, again from loosely related sultanates that had fallen under British colonial control. British rule also left an important demographic transformation, as independent Malaysia inherited a large Chinese population (almost 40 per cent of the population). Ethnic politics have since dominated Malaysian politics, and certainly the strong Malay Muslim identity has grown and been nurtured in juxtaposition with the large Chinese and smaller Indian populations. Singapore was a tiny island with a very small population that only grew in importance as the British transformed it into an important regional hub. Catholic identity, which became so important in the Philippines, was a direct consequence of intense missionization under Spanish rule.

Southeast Asian countries therefore entered the twentieth century with important influences from European colonialism. Some areas remained only subtly touched by European influence, but others were clearly marked, transformed, or even created out of this experience.

Nationalism, communism and the modern state

The first half of the twentieth century radically transformed the region as modern states were crafted. Accompanying the decline of European empires, new ideologies of political organization emerged. Nationalism inspired groups to organize against colonial occupation and to claim their own states as new, modern nations. Communism was also spreading as a radically new form of political organization based on rejection of election results in 1990. After the return to civilian rule in 2011, the latter issue has become less relevant and the use of “Myanmar” is more broadly accepted in the English-speaking world. Because of the widespread use of Burma up until recent years, I use “Myanmar” to refer to the country after 1989 but “Burma” otherwise.