

1 Introduction

For much of the late twentieth century, organized labor was a silent presence in Southeast Asian politics. Despite rapid industrialization and a swelling proletariat in many countries in the region, working-class organizations were rarely serious players in national politics (Deyo 1989; Hadiz 1997; Hutchison and Brown 2001). Little surprise, then, that labor has not featured prominently in most analyses of Southeast Asian politics. To the extent that organized labor makes more than a passing appearance in scholarly narratives of the region's politics, they highlight its weakness, typically as a critical facilitating condition for export-oriented industrialization (Caraway 2007; Haggard 1990).

But organized labor was not always so peripheral to Southeast Asian politics (Deyo 1997; Hewison and Rodan 1994). Left-wing organizations and their associated trade unions were important actors in anti-colonial struggles, and in one case, Singapore, leftist unions nearly established a socialist government in the early 1960s (Deyo 1981; Hewison and Rodan 1994). As the region became embroiled in postwar geopolitical rivalries, however, the political climate became more fraught for both the left and working-class organizations (Hansson et al. 2020; Hewison and Rodan 1994). Regarded as avenues of communist infiltration, pro-Western governments in the region waged war on leftists and working class organizations (Deyo 1997). After rolling back the left, capitalist countries in Southeast Asia – Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand – established regimes of labor control that checked labor mobilization for decades to come. Surviving working-class organizations were relatively docile, often under state control, organized a small proportion of the region's growing industrial workforce, and posed little threat to ruling elites. (Hewison and Rodan 1994).

In addition to geopolitics, the “lateness” of industrialization (Gerschenkron 1962) in Southeast Asia fostered less propitious conditions for the development of powerful labor movements. Industrialization only began in earnest after World War II, and capitalist countries initially promoted import-substituting industries, which absorbed little labor (Caraway 2007; Hewison 1997; Hutchison 1997; Rasiah 1997). In Latin America, import-substitution industrialization provided the material foundation for a populist coalition that incorporated labor (O'Donnell 1973), but in Southeast Asia, Cold War rivalries blocked this pathway. The higher capital intensity of late and dependent industrialization also resulted in a smaller industrial working class and a larger informal sector, creating a substantial reserve army of labor that structurally weakened the working class (Bellin 2002; Rueschemeyer et al. 1992).

As some countries in the region began to energetically turn their attention to expanding labor-intensive manufactured exports in the 1970s and 1980s, however, the industrial workforce grew rapidly, creating fertile conditions for a resurgence of working-class organizations (Caraway 2007; Hewison 1997; Hutchison 1997; Rasiah 1997; Rodan 1997). The labor control regimes established after the rollback of the left both prevented the re-emergence of militant unions and proved useful in assuring the low wages essential for export-oriented industrialization to succeed (Hadiz 1997; Kuruvilla 1996). Although significant episodes of working-class mobilization occurred in several countries – Thailand in the 1970s, the Philippines in the 1980s, and Indonesia in the 1990s – ruling elites soon squelched them, and by the turn of the century, there was little sign of industrial unrest.

The countries that ended up in the socialist camp – Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam – followed a different pathway but with similar results. In Indochina, the devastation of the Vietnam War and poor economic performance in the years that followed stunted industrialization. In Burma as well, there was little industrial development because the military government pursued an idiosyncratic and isolationist economic policy (Than 2007). In all four countries, agricultural employment dwarfed that in industry. In addition to the small size of the working class, ruling parties in socialist states adopted forms of labor incorporation that limited the potential for trade unions to become vehicles for working-class mobilization. Communist parties in Laos and Vietnam – and in Cambodia after the fall of the Khmer Rouge – integrated a party-controlled union into their organizational structures, while in Burma the military regime eventually dissolved unions (Arnold and Campbell 2017; Fry 2008; Hansson 2003; Nuon and Serrano 2010).

In the twenty-first century, economic and political transformations disrupted or ruptured these postwar institutions of containment in some parts of Southeast Asia. Democratization in Indonesia and East Timor, political liberalization in Myanmar, and a surge of employment in labor-intensive export industries in Cambodia and Vietnam laid the groundwork for the re-emergence of worker mobilization. Although organized labor did not become a decisive political player at the national level in these countries, working-class contention became a prominent feature of political life and often prompted governments to make important concessions.

Labor contentiousness in Southeast Asia during the twenty-first century does not correlate with regime type or with conventional measures of labor strength such as union density or organizational concentration. This pattern of development affirms the findings of many comparative studies of labor politics that have found that democratization does not consistently herald

a resurgence of labor movements (Caraway, Cook et al. 2015; Cook 2010; Crowley 2004; Crowley and Ost 2001; Evans and Sil 2020; Hutchison 2015; Ost 2005). In democracies, workers are freer to establish unions and, in most cases, also endure less state-sponsored violence. But this has not been enough to overcome other conditions that thwart organized labor in Southeast Asia. Although organized labor in some countries that democratized or liberalized became stronger – Indonesia, Myanmar, and Timor-Leste – in others organized labor has become weaker. Cambodia and Vietnam also illustrate that worker militancy can be greater in autocratic settings than in some democracies.

Organized Labor in Southeast Asia analyzes the development of organized labor since World War II. It offers insights into why the working class continues to be largely contained in some countries and feistier in others and grapples with the question of why democratization has had mixed effects on labor movements in the region. Section 2 traces the historical roots of labor containment in Southeast Asia to the geopolitics of the early postwar period, analyzing how countries aligned with the West rolled back leftist organizations and instituted systems of labor control that largely held workers in check during the twentieth century. With these historical legacies established, Section 3 brings the analysis to the twenty-first century, outlining the economic and political processes that have reproduced or disrupted these twentieth-century patterns. Section 4 analyzes the three countries where workers have proven to be the most contentious in the twenty-first century: Cambodia, Indonesia, and Vietnam. I develop a typology of patterns of labor contention and illustrate three distinctive “anatomies of contention.” The concluding section summarizes the main findings and reflects on labor’s response to the wave of autocratization that has swept through the region in recent years.

2 Postwar Legacies in the Twentieth Century

In the wake of Japan’s defeat in World War II and amid the birth pangs of the Cold War, nationalist and anti-colonial movements in Southeast Asia rallied their forces to wrest independence from the western powers. Leftist organizations and their affiliated trade unions were central and sometimes dominant actors in these movements. Within two decades, however, governments allied with the West – Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand – had stamped out the left and militant working-class organizations. With leftist groups defeated, governing elites established systems of labor control designed to prevent the resurrection of radical labor movements. Rollback and containment stuck. At the end of the century, unionization rates were low, and trade unions were hopelessly divided, defanged, or coopted by ruling parties.

Other countries in the region – Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam – followed a distinctive pathway that nevertheless resulted in a strikingly similar outcome for organized labor. Western powers failed to roll back the left in these countries, but decades of war and economic closure took a heavy toll on the economy and society. Economies remained highly dependent on agriculture, and the industrial working class was small. In addition, the ruling parties either banned unions outright or subordinated them within party structures. Thus, at century's end, organized labor in socialist Southeast Asia bore many similarities to organized labor in capitalist Southeast Asia.

2.1 Rolling Back the Left and Containing Labor Movements in Capitalist Southeast Asia: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand

After Japan's defeat in 1945, the anti-colonial movements that gained strength during the war became a force to be reckoned with throughout the region. The tumult of the postwar period presented an opportunity, which the left seized. The "loss" of China in 1949 and the devastation of the Korean War in the early 1950s, however, placed Southeast Asia on the frontline of the global confrontation between communism and capitalism. Intent on staunching the spread of communism, the United States allied with conservative forces in the region to repress leftist organizations (Hansson et al. 2020; Hewison and Rodan 1994). By the mid-1950s, governments allied with the West had decimated the left in Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand, and by the mid-1960s in Indonesia and Singapore (see Table 1). With the defeat of the left, these capitalist and usually authoritarian regimes embarked on industrialization drives that structurally transformed their economies, sowing the seeds for the re-emergence of new, and potentially contentious, working-class movements. To avert this possibility, governments erected systems of labor control (see Table 1) that largely succeeded in keeping the working class under wraps.

2.1.1 Phase I: Rolling Back the Left

Leftist organizations and trade unions throughout Southeast Asia took full advantage of the political moment after the Japanese defeat in World War II to rally support for their cause. Among the groups that opposed the return of colonial forces, leftist organizations were influential and often dominant, and the working-class organizations aligned with them were usually the strongest. Many also had ties to the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), established in 1945. Although the WFTU included both communist and noncommunist unions, western powers perceived it to be a Soviet front organization, and

Table 1 Rollback and labor control in capitalist Southeast Asia

Country	Rollback completed	Mode of labor control after rollback	Union/party landscape
Indonesia	Mid-1960s	Authoritarian state	Mono-union (SPSI) with w ruling party
Malaysia	Mid-1950s	Authoritarian state	Multi-union, MTUC domin ruling party
Philippines	Mid-1950s	Employer (mid-1950s–1972, 1986–2000) Authoritarian state (1972–86)	Multi-union but TUCP fav dictatorship
Singapore	Mid-1960s	Authoritarian state	Mono-union (NTUC) linke
Thailand	Mid-1950s	Authoritarian state (1958–73) Despotic market (late 1970s–2000)	No unions under Sarit, mu

^a As percentage of the nonagricultural workforce in 1995.

^b As percentage of the total workforce in 2000.

Source: The 1995 data are from the International Labour Organization (1997); the 2000 data are from the *Foreign Labor Department of Labor*.

noncommunist western unions soon exited the WFTU to join the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) in 1949. After this, the WFTU became more firmly aligned with the eastern bloc (Carew 1996; Devinatz 2013; Weiler 1981). The affinity of the strongest unions in the region for the WFTU confirmed western powers' worst fears. As the Cold War heated up in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the confrontation between the western and eastern blocs became intertwined with the efforts of conservative elites in Southeast Asia to defeat leftist groups that challenged them for control of new nation-states. The rollback of the left took longer to accomplish in some countries than in others, but governments in the region ultimately succeeded in eliminating leftists and their affiliated labor organizations as significant organized forces.

Among the countries that contained the left by the mid-1950s was the Philippines. During the war, the main resistance to the Japanese occupation was a peasant-based movement, the Hukbalahap (or the Huks), which fought alongside returning US forces in 1944 to expel the Japanese. After defeating Japan, the Americans disarmed the Huks and granted independence to the Philippines in 1946 (Kerkvliet 1977). With the transition to independent rule, the urban and rural organizations that were part of the united front against Japan retooled for competition in democratic elections and formed the Democratic Alliance (DA). Among the groups that coalesced into the DA were labor organizations, of which the Congress of Labor Organization (CLO) was the most powerful (Dejillas 1994; Ramos 1976; Wurfel 1959). The DA competed in the April 1946 congressional races and overcame vicious attacks from landed oligarchs and the military police to elect six candidates. The Speaker of the House prevented them from taking their seats, however, and soon the Huks were in open revolt (Kerkvliet 1977). With US support, the government waged a counterinsurgency war against the Huks and cracked down on other left-wing organizations, including the CLO.¹ After suspending the CLO's registration and imprisoning its leadership, the government sponsored new, more easily controlled unions (Ramos 1976; Wurfel 1959). By the end of the 1950s, a labor movement that had been largely class-based and politically oriented became "conservatively economic and somewhat coopted into the system" (Ramos 1976, 33).

In the British colonies of Malaya and Singapore, leftists and their affiliated unions were especially strong at the end of the war. There, ethnic Malay elites had cooperated with the Japanese, and it was the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) that led the fight against the Japanese and served as the de facto governing authority before Britain's reassertion of power in September 1945

¹ In addition to concerns about communist infiltration, the United States also sought to protect its substantial business interests and bases. The DA had pledged to limit US influence in the archipelago (Kerkvliet 1977).

(Stenson 1970; Trocki 2001). Among the groups that seized the postwar moment of political opportunity, perhaps the most assertive were the CPM-linked unions – the Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions (PMFTU) and the Singapore Federation of Trade Unions (SFTU) – which mobilized thousands of workers in an “unparalleled wave of strikes” (Fong and Tan 1983; Morgan 1977, 170). These disruptions prompted a backlash from employers that further escalated the conflict and culminated with the CPM mounting an armed rebellion against the colonial state. The British declared a state of emergency in 1948 and the leadership of CPM-affiliated unions went underground (Jomo and Todd 1994; Stenson 1970). By the time Malaya became independent in 1957, the CPM was a rag-tag force hiding in the jungle and the British had supplanted the PMFTU with “responsible” unions affiliated to the Malayan Trade Union Congress (MTUC) (Fong and Tan 1983; Rudner 1973). The labor movement would never “be as strong as in the immediate postwar years, numerically or politically” (Morgan 1977, 185).

In neighboring Singapore, it was the People’s Action Party (PAP) and not the British that quashed the left. Shunning the pro-government unions that the British established in the late 1950s, workers flocked to militant organizations (Trocki 2001). Although these unions initially aligned with the PAP, they switched allegiances after leftist PAP cadres resigned and formed a new socialist party, the Barisan Sosialis, in the wake of the PAP’s victory in the 1959 elections. The PAP’s leader, Lee Kuan Yew, responded by attacking leftist opponents, deregistering assertive unions, and shepherding the remaining unions into the state-backed National Trade Union Centre (NTUC, later Congress) (Deyo 1989; Luther 1978). As in Malaya, with the government’s having purged the militants from the labor movement, “strike action, confrontation and worker militancy were things of the past” (Trocki 2001, 128).

This general pattern of leftist groups seizing political opportunities during the early postwar period, followed by rollback, unfolded in Thailand as well. Unlike its neighbors, Thailand had not been colonized. With conquest by Japan inevitable, most of Thailand’s political elites chose to cooperate with Japan. Among the Thais who resisted the Japanese occupation was Pridi Phanomyong, one of the architects of the 1932 overthrow of Siam’s absolute monarchy. Pridi founded the Sahachip (Cooperative) Party, which competed in elections in Thailand’s revived parliamentary institutions and dominated civilian governments from 1944 to 1947. During this period, working-class groups began to organize as well, most prominently the left-leaning Association of United Workers of Thailand (AUWT).² The AUWT’s leaders belonged to several

² This organization is also commonly referred to as the Central Labor Union (CLU).

parties, including the Communist Party, but they backed Pridi's party in elections. Pridi served briefly as prime minister in 1946, but he resigned after Thailand's young king died from a mysterious gunshot wound. As the political scene became more chaotic, the military intervened and overthrew the civilian government in 1947, then proceeded to crack down on the AUWT and other organizations allied with Pridi. Due to his anti-Japanese war record, the Americans had initially favored Pridi over conservative forces in Thailand, but after the Viet Minh took up arms against the French in neighboring Indochina, Thailand became a frontline country in the Cold War and the Americans changed allegiances, throwing their support behind a series of military regimes (Hewison 2020).³ Initially, military governments permitted labor organizing and even sponsored trade unions, but after General Sarit took power in the twin coups of 1957 and 1958, he imprisoned key labor leaders and banned labor organizations, effectively shutting down most labor mobilization for years to come (Brown 2003; Glassman 2004).

Indonesia was the last to stamp out leftist organizations and their affiliated unions. One reason for this is that the Indonesian Communist Party (*Partai Komunis Indonesia*, PKI) was in a weakened state when the war against the Dutch ended. Noncommunist nationalist forces had crushed a rebellion by communist militias in 1948, which provided leading nationalists with strong anti-communist credentials. After independence, President Sukarno adopted a nonaligned posture on the global stage and permitted the PKI to regroup. They soon began to participate in the new nation's parliamentary system of governance (Kahin and Kahin 1995; Mortimer 2006). Among the plethora of labor unions active in the early postwar period, the PKI-aligned All-Indonesian Federation of Workers' Organizations (*Sentral Organisasi Buruh Seluruh Indonesia*, SOBSI) was the most powerful (Hawkins 1971; Tedjasukmana 1958). The PKI proved to be adept at electoral competition, winning 15 percent of the national parliamentary seats in 1955, and increasing its share of the vote in the 1957 local elections. The PKI became the largest nonruling communist party in the world and began to challenge both the military in nationalized Dutch enterprises and landowners in the countryside (Mortimer 2006). The Indonesian military and American officials became increasingly concerned that Indonesia would fall into communist hands (Kahin and Kahin 1995).⁴ The US

³ Pridi's royalist and military opponents accused him of being a communist, a charge that the United States came to accept, and which became more persuasive after he fled to China (Hewison 2020).

⁴ These fears led the Americans to support a group of rebellious colonels based in the outer islands in the late 1950s. This endeavor failed spectacularly, further stoking anti-American sentiment (Kahin and Kahin 1995).

directed substantial resources to anti-PKI generals, and after a failed coup attempt in 1965, General Suharto rallied the PKI’s opponents to slaughter the party and its affiliated groups (Roosa 2006; Simpson 2008).⁵ By the time Suharto shunted Sukarno aside to become president in 1967, the military and its allies had obliterated the PKI and SOBSI.

2.1.2 Phase II: Containing Labor

Once militant unions vanished from the scene, capitalist regimes in the region ramped up their industrialization drives. Defanging unions had the added benefit, from the perspective of ruling elites, of aiding the rapid expansion of labor-intensive industries that fueled export-oriented industrialization (Hadiz 1997; Rodan et al. 2001). Wages comprised a significant share of production costs in these industries, and exports faced stiff competition in world markets. Cost containment was a paramount concern.⁶ Before this economic transformation, union members worked primarily in plantations, docks, mines, transportation, the civil service, and the small number of large manufacturing companies (both private and state-owned) (Deyo 2001). As can be seen in Table 2, industry contributed less than 20 percent of GDP in 1960 in all countries except the Philippines, while agriculture accounted for a large share of GDP in all countries except Singapore. In terms of employment, agriculture absorbed well over half the labor force in all countries but Singapore (see Table 3). As industrialization

Table 2 Share of agriculture and industry in GDP

	Agriculture			Industry ^a		
	1960	1980	1994	1960	1980	1994
Indonesia	45	24	17	17	42	41
Malaysia	40	22	14	18	38	43
Philippines	26	25	22	28	39	33
Singapore	4	1	0	18	38	36
Thailand	40	23	10	19	29	39

^a Includes mining, manufacturing, construction, and electricity, water, and gas industries
Source: World Bank (1978, 1996).

⁵ This coup remains one of the most controversial episodes in Indonesian history, and scholars continue to disagree about the primary actors behind it. For excellent summaries, see Roosa (2006) and Robinson (2020).
⁶ See Kuruvilla (1996) for an analysis of the connection between industrialization and industrial relations regimes.

Table 3 Share of labor force in agriculture and industry

	Agriculture			Industry ^a		
	1960	1980	1994	1960	1980	1994
Indonesia	68	58	46	8	12	19
Malaysia	56	41	21	12	19	32
Philippines	61	52	45	10	15	15
Singapore	9	2	0	21	42	33
Thailand	82	71	56	4	10	18

^a Includes mining, manufacturing, construction, and electricity, water, and gas industries
Source: World Bank (1996, 1976) and World Development Indicators database.

progressed, agriculture’s share of GDP and employment diminished, while industry’s share of GDP and employment increased.

Economic transformations created the raw material for a resurgence of labor organizations, but “nowhere spawned effective trade unionism or enhanced worker participation in political or economic arenas” (Deyo 2001, 265). One reason for this outcome is that after rolling back the left, governments in capitalist Southeast Asia erected systems of labor control that prevented the revival of militant unions. Most countries adopted “authoritarian state” models of labor control that deployed legal and extra-legal techniques to prevent or curtail worker activism (Anner 2015). Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines under Marcos fall in this authoritarian state category. The specific features of their labor control regimes varied (e.g., some were corporatist, others were not), but in all cases, the state was the primary agent of labor control.⁷ In countries that were more democratic, labor control regimes conformed more closely to “despotic market” and “employer” modes of labor control (Anner 2015). In these two modes of labor control, the state still plays an important role, but the locus of labor control shifts to the market or the employer. In despotic market regimes, the whip of the market – for example, the fear of job loss – is the primary means of curtailing labor militancy. In employer-based regimes, employers deploy preemptive measures such as forming yellow unions or buying-off union leaders, and retaliatory actions like firing organizers or hiring goons to beat them up. Thailand hews most closely to the despotic market model

⁷ Frenkel makes a useful distinction between Singapore, which he designates as state corporatist because unions are controlled by the state but included in decision-making bodies, and “state exclusionary” systems in Thailand and Malaysia, where unions were not incorporated into decision-making bodies. The Philippines under Marcos and Indonesia under Suharto fit somewhat awkwardly into this typology because they have elements of both – they were state corporatist in that the state fostered a union and included it on tripartite bodies, but they also utilized state exclusionary methods (Caraway 2004; Ford 1999; Hadiz 1997; Hutchison 2015).