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NATIONS AND STATES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

This reflective and provocative book outlines the emergence of the nation-states of modern Southeast Asia. It considers various ways of looking at Southeast Asian history, combining narrative, analysis and discussion. The book focuses mainly on the period from the eighteenth century to the present. It is divided into three sections: the first gives a broad historical overview of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, The Philippines, Burma/Myanmar, Vietnam and Siam/Thailand; the second reflects, in a comparative context, on significant problems in understanding Southeast Asia's past and present; the third explores the current state of writing Southeast Asian history. Underlying the discussion is an awareness of how ongoing tensions between East and West shape history and frame the present. This book reflects a lifetime's scholarship and will become a major interpretative synthesis of modern Southeast Asia.

Nicholas Tarling was Professor of History at the University of Auckland from 1968 to 1997. He edited the two-volume *Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, published in 1992, and wrote *Britain, Southeast Asia and the Onset of the Pacific War*, published by Cambridge in 1996. He was the founder president of the New Zealand Asian Studies Society and is currently a Fellow of the New Zealand Asia Institute at the University of Auckland.

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For Brook Barrington

PREFACE

The present world is a world of states, neither a world of tribes nor a world of empires, though the remnants of such forms are still present and occupy part of our thinking. Such states, moreover, are based on a concept of nation, though, while states are expected or assumed to be nation-states, not all nations are represented in the world by states, despite widespread aspiration. That world, clearly still emerging, has been emerging over a long period. To a large extent it represents the world-wide application of a European approach to the organisation of human society, though the approach took time to develop even in Europe, and is still indeed in process of application there, too.

One purpose of this book is to outline the emergence of the nation-states of modern Southeast Asia. That is the task of Part One. It can indeed be no more than an outline: and other sources will be needed by those who want to study their history more deeply. Another constraint, less obvious, should also become apparent. In most of Southeast Asia there were states well before the emergence of the system of states with which we are more familiar. They are not, however, the same. In studying the states, we cannot presume that they always existed, or that they were bound to emerge in the ways they have. A summary risks foreshortening the process, allowing the present to dominate the past, offering what Herbert Butterfield would have recognised as a Whig interpretation. ‘The theory that is behind the whig interpretation – the theory that we study the past for the sake of the present – is one that is really introduced for the purpose of facilitating the abridgment of history...it serves to simplify the study of history by providing an excuse for leaving things out.’¹

Part Two of the book takes up some of the issues that arise. But it has another focus, too. The first part of the book attempts to look at the countries as they have emerged one by one, even though that risks the presumptions of ‘presentism’, that what now exists was bound to exist. The second half of the book represents a more regional focus. So many of the issues are common to each country, yet affected the countries differently. That should make for a better understanding of issues and countries.

Part Two has another rationale as well. In shifting the focus from country to region, it is not only attempting to explain each country’s history better: it is also responding to a current interest in Southeast Asia as a region. The

Preface

concept is indeed in some sense itself quite a modern one. In previous centuries, there were words that attempted to describe it despite its diversity by suggesting some common feature, like 'Further India' or the 'Nanyang'. The term 'Southeast Asia' is more recent, and though it originates in the Second World War, it has tended to gain acceptance. The fact that in yet more recent times the area has become noted for rapid economic advance has added to the currency of the term, even though that advance is in fact highly differentiated.

The extent to which the world has become a world of states has encouraged a tendency to group the states by regions, and sometimes those states have grouped themselves, though always partly in order to attain their objectives as states. 'Southeast Asia' was once a term used by outsiders far more than by those living in the region; but now it is becoming something of an economic and political reality, and its leaders themselves are moving to make ASEAN an organisation of and for the region, instead of an organisation designed to add to the security of some of its states vis-a-vis others. The degree to which supra-state organisations will come to dominate economic and political relations among states remains to be seen. To a large extent they still represent attempts by states to seek their particular interests. States join one or more groups and seek to affect the character of world-wide organisations and their programmes.

Such organisations are an illustration of the extent to which the world has become one at the same time as it has become divided among states of equal sovereignty but different strength. There are, of course, many others. It is a world of 'multinationals' as well as of international relations: successors, say, to the United East India Company of the Dutch, the VOC (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie), to the English or the Danish East India Companies. Indeed, the striking feature of the discourse of the late twentieth century is its world-wide character. What we argue about is not whether there should be 'democracy' but what kind of democracy it should be; not whether there are 'human rights' but what they are, how they should be applied, and by whom.

This wider discourse also leads to a kind of ideological regionalisation that parallels but is not identical with the geographical, and, like it, may or may not be taken up by nations and their leaders. In some cases, they have again gained pseudo-geographical names, such as the North–South dichotomy, overlapping the other antinomies, like 'developed' and 'under-developed'. The more venerable East–West polarity overlapped a similar antinomy, also described as between the 'imperialist' and the 'colonial', the 'developed' and the 'developing'. Given that the world that has taken shape is so deeply affected by the European mode of discourse that has continued to emerge, that is not surprising, particularly as that European mode was taken up, albeit in new focus, by the two most powerful successor-states, the

US and Russia. Just because we have now to look at the world as a whole, we tend to break it up into manageable chunks that may lead us to misinterpret it just as much as the problem of managing chronology contributed to the Whig interpretation of history. Edward Said has given new meaning, but also new currency, to 'Orientalism'. Such interpretations can be useful in modifying mind-sets, but they must not merely replace them. The third part of this book discusses some of the ways of looking at Southeast Asian history.

Southeast Asia, and to a differing extent the countries within it, have witnessed the interplay, often characterised as that between East and West, that in some sense has created the modern world. Now the countries of Southeast Asia reckon the levels of 'development' against the 'international' norms, their own 'multinationals' invest elsewhere, and they proffer their own interpretation of 'human rights'. In a sense this is part of a continuing history, which the three parts of this small volume attempt in modest measure to encompass, through the narratives in Part One, the analyses in Part Two, and the discussion in Part Three.

Tackling this book, the reader may wish to start with the narratives, even perhaps to diverge, on concluding them, and follow up the history of one or more countries in greater depth or detail. With or without that reinforcement, the reader may, the author hopes, want to take up the topics that he has himself found particularly interesting as a result of a long period of study of and teaching about Southeast Asia that has turned out to coincide with a transformation of its place in the world, and of the countries within it. How the rest of the world, itself changing, may understand that change, and in so doing, indeed, contribute to it, is the subject of the concluding remarks. ●

1 H. Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, London: Bell, 1931, p. 24.

SOUTHEAST ASIA



Map of the region, showing present-day national frontiers

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