Political Space in Southeast Asia: 'Asian-style' and Other Democracies

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Southeast Asia exhibits a remarkable range of political forms. This study examines the resiliency of Southeast Asian struggles to expand political space and replace authoritarianism with more representative political regimes. Following an introduction examining these struggles during the colonial and post-colonial periods, attention is given to the notion of 'Asian-style' democracy. It is suggested that this terminology represents a rejection of liberalism and of associated western-style democratic values. Malaysia and Singapore are cited as examples of illiberal approaches to political space, democratization and representation by the ruling parties. In contrast, Thailand and Indonesia are examples of recent democratization, which have more to do with popular struggles for expanded political space than with elite notions of 'Asian-style' democracy. There are some reasons for optimism regarding further democratization, or at least for the maintenance and expansion of political space, in the region as a whole.

Southeast Asia is diverse and exhibits a remarkable range of political forms: absolute monarchy (Brunei), authoritarian post-socialist regimes (Vietnam, Laos), military-dominated dictatorship (Burma), crumbling authoritarianism (Indonesia), electoral authoritarianism (Singapore, Malaysia), various versions of elected representative governments (Thailand, the Philippines) and the unclassifiable oddity of Cambodia. This study could not hope to do justice to the expanse of political expression in the countries of the region. Rather, the intention is to suggest the significance of some of the Southeast Asian experience for understanding the long history and resiliency of the struggles to expand political space and replace authoritarianism with more representative political regimes.

Often the struggle to establish democratic or representative forms in Southeast Asia is seen to have been relatively recent, and as indicated in the Introduction to this collection, there is a degree of pessimism regarding democratization in Southeast Asia. However, if attention is moved to the existence and expansion of political space, then the Southeast Asian experience during the 1980s and 1990s is cause for limited optimism. The term 'political space' is employed in preference to civil society; it is an

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arena created through struggle with the state and involving activist groups. It can be created even under oppressive regimes, and may exist where civil society is not especially vibrant. The idea of the struggle for space avoids some of the normative assumptions associated with certain ideas of civil society, which could conceivably become dominated by groups which, for instance, repress subordinate classes or groups. In Southeast Asia the coincidence of a period of exceptional economic growth in the 1980s and early 1990s with an uneven but generalised expansion of political space has been the cause for considerable theoretical agitation, even if the path to democracy still has considerable obstacles.

It is important, however, that this focus on the recent past should not prevent acknowledgement of the ‘pre-history’ of struggles to expand representation and political space. This study begins with a discussion of this background, since the late nineteenth century, indicating that there are important antecedents to recent struggles over political space. It then turns to an examination of the various approaches to democratization in Southeast Asia, including so-called ‘Asian-style’ democracy and ‘Asian values’, with examples from Singapore and Malaysia. It will then concentrate on the struggles for more open and democratic politics in Indonesia and Thailand.

**Struggles for Expanded Political Space**

During the late nineteenth century colonial Southeast Asian governments (including the royal Thai or Siamese state) had developed centralized and bureaucratized administrations, marked out their national boundaries, and established systems of law and order. The colonial era saw local economies reoriented to commodity trade with the West. Whereas pre-colonial states had been concerned with controlling their peripheries, the colonial era saw the political focus shift to urban areas and civil society–state relations. As might be expected, these administrations were not representative. All attempted to limit and control political space.

The early twentieth century saw nationalism and anti-colonialism emerge in opposition to the unrepresentative and authoritarian colonial and royalist administrations. The development of elitist education systems played a role in this, as had exposure to new ideologies such as liberalism and Marxism. While there was significant variation across Southeast Asia – between, for example, direct and indirect colonial rule and the oddity of Thailand’s absolute monarchy – all administrations were cautious regarding unsanctioned political activity.

But this should not obscure the significance of anti-colonial struggles, or the fact that the 1920s and 1930s saw a Southeast Asian political renaissance and considerable political agitation. Whereas previous anti-
colonial challenges were 'essentially traditional in character'; the new movements involved a fundamentally modern struggle for the expansion of the political space. These struggles included demands for greater political representation and national independence.

While some colonial administrations and Thailand – following the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932 – permitted the establishment of councils, none were particularly representative. In any case, as Pluvier observes, with the exceptions of the Philippines and Thailand, 'none of Southeast Asia’s administrative systems was a constitutionally complete entity: each was a headless torso, and appendage of an empire with its locus of power thousands of miles away'.

Sanctioned political activity revolved around the various local councils in the colonies and the newly elected parliament in Thailand. However, the first decades of the twentieth century also saw the emergence of non-state, mainly urban, civic associations meant to further the interests of locals and immigrant communities. While not officially permitted to engage in politics, these organizations often became politicized, and were increasingly pitted against the state. Some of these groups moved beyond welfare. Debating clubs, literary and study groups, and the like, often nationalist training grounds, provided educated locals with opportunities to confront the assumptions of colonial rule while organized as ‘native’ associations. For example, in British Burma, the Young Men’s Buddhist Association became the General Council of Burmese Associations in 1920, and began to agitate against the colonial government. In the Dutch East Indies (to become Indonesia), a plethora of associations had become politicized, especially student groups and Muslim organizations. Many of these groups were influenced by political movements in Europe and anti-colonial sentiment in other parts of the world.

At about the same time, as colonial capitalism developed, immigrant societies were often transformed into separate employer and employee organisations, and unions emerged. Unions were significant as they operated in strategic areas (the ports, transport and trade), and were especially threatening when linked to socialist, communist and other oppositional movements.

The Great Depression years in the 1930s saw the expansion of opposition and anti-colonial movements. The economic downturn had a major impact in Southeast Asia. Commodity exports declined, and trading houses, plantations and mines were forced to lay off labour. While the anti-colonial struggles were overwhelmingly nationalist – rather than communist – many of the opposition groups shared a fundamental distrust of western liberalism and capitalism. Certainly, the colonial experience and the economic depression had discredited capitalism in the eyes of many among
the local people.

However, as the second world war approached, there was a move to curtail political activism. While this reflected a move to the right elsewhere in world politics, it was also a response to nationalist movements in Asia. In Thailand, the military had established its control over government and moved closer to the model of fascist regimes that were becoming established in Europe and Japan. Colonial administrations moved against leftist and nationalist opposition.

The early campaigns of the Pacific War (1941–45) saw military defeats suffered by all of the Western colonial powers in Southeast Asia, effectively demonstrating that colonialism was not invulnerable. While Southeast Asians were not enamoured with Japanese colonialism, the Japanese interregnum set the wheels of decolonization in motion. Immediately following the end of the Second World War there was another period of relative political openness. While this period was sometimes short, as in Malaya, and intermittent, as in Thailand, the time saw considerable political change in the region. The dynamic force of the period was nationalism.

Nationalists saw that the historical tide was running to their advantage. For example, the establishment of the United Nations in 1945 meant that decolonization was on the international agenda. Political independence became the major political issue. Much of the nationalist rhetoric exhibited a strong anti-western tone, in both the political and economic spheres. This was clear in Burma, Indonesia, French Indochina and, in a more limited way, Thailand, Malaya and the Philippines. By 1950, Southeast Asian nationalists could see progress: the Philippines and Indonesia had gained independence, albeit by very different routes; Thailand had stayed out of the clutches of a resurgent British imperialism; the Chinese communists were in power in Beijing; and the French were challenged in their colonial outposts in Indochina. However, the cold war soon cast a pall over this initial optimism.

Decolonisation resulted in quite different political outcomes across the region, with diverse impacts on political space. On one hand, the cold war, United States (US) intervention in the region and, in many countries, internal leftist rebellion and revolution, saw political space narrowed against any groups identified as ‘communist’. The cold war mentality brought support for pro-western, authoritarian and often military-dominated governments. In Thailand, for example, the US supported corrupt but anti-communist generals in the police and army. This support for repressive political structures was critical in narrowing political space, even for democrats and nationalists. Throughout Southeast Asia the US supported anti-communists: in Indochina, backing the French, and then becoming directly involved; against President Sukarno and the Partai Komunis
Indonesia (PKI), championing the military; supporting President Magsaysay in the Philippines, against the Huk rebellion; in Burma and Cambodia against leaders defined as ‘dangerously neutral’; and in Malaya, supporting the British in their anti-communist war.

On the other hand, an opening occurred as some leftist groups, for example, the PKI and anti-communist socialists, chose ‘peaceful means’, and parliamentary government. However, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, political space was generally narrowed, often by military-backed regimes – in Thailand, Laos, North and South Vietnam, Indonesia, Burma – and by monarchies in Brunei and Cambodia. In Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines, electoral politics continued. Malaya was granted independence in 1957 and Singapore gained internal self-government in 1959; in 1963 Malaysia was created from the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak and North Borneo, but Singapore left to become an independent sovereign state in 1965.

The 1970s were not a golden age for Southeast Asian democracy. While the regimes they replaced were far from democratic, the establishment of socialist governments in Laos and Vietnam meant continued political closure. In Cambodia, the Pol Pot regime embarked on a reign of hyper-nationalist terror that ended when Vietnam invaded in 1979 and installed a client regime. In the Philippines, President Marcos entrenched his dictatorship, as did Suharto in Indonesia. Like Indonesia, the military continued to dominate the politics of Thailand and Burma, while Brunei remained an absolute monarchy. It was only in Singapore and Malaysia where electoral politics was significant, although political competition was not free and fair.

Despite this continued authoritarianism, the 1970s saw the foundations laid for the democratization of political activity in parts of Southeast Asia in the 1980s and 1990s. In the non-communist states, there were some temporary political openings. For example, economic downturns in a number of economies saw some oppositional activity.

Between 1972 and 1975, a pattern of student and intellectual activism emerged across the region: in Indonesia, students protested Japanese economic domination; in Malaysia, students demonstrated in 1974; and in Singapore, students took up issues including civil liberties and links with workers. The most remarkable student activism was in Thailand in 1973, where students and intellectuals brought thousands of people into the streets to overthrow a military dictatorship. Student activism grew, in part, out of a massive expansion of tertiary education, but also out of the changes taking place in social structures through the growth of import-substituting industrialization. Governments in the region, however, having observed western students challenging their own governments in the late 1960s, were
uncomfortable with the prospect of subversive student radicalism, and repressive measures were introduced. Student activists did not operate alone. The potential power of students and intellectuals in expanding political space was most clearly demonstrated in Thailand. But, governments of the region feared the growth of alliances between students, workers, peasants and the downtrodden, especially as students were identified as allies of growing communist movements.

By the late 1970s, authoritarian governments appeared firmly in control throughout the region: Vietnam, Laos and Burma remained tightly controlled by the ruling parties; Cambodians were hardly more free under the Vietnamese-installed successor to the ousted the Pol Pot regime; in the Philippines the Marcos dynasty maintained martial law; in 1976, Thailand returned to authoritarianism; in Indonesia, where its President Suharto and the military appeared strong; and in Singapore, the People's Action Party (PAP), while elected, further narrowed the political space, as oppositions were subjected to increased repression; and the elected Malaysian government cracked down on opposition groups. In many of these countries, the military played significant political roles or had directly intervened.

Authoritarianism and Democratic Forces

As the region entered the 1980s, the prospects for democratization were not bright. There was no crisis of authoritarianism. While some challenges remained, the authoritarian governments of the region seemed strong, and the market-oriented economies appeared better able to deliver economic gains. Despite this, by the mid-1990s, authoritarianism appeared to be in retreat.

In the late 1990s, Brunei is the only country in the region that has not moved to either a more representative political system or seen some expansion of political space or regularisation of the political and legal framework. The post-socialist regimes in Vietnam and Laos have not permitted real political competition, but there have been limited challenges to authoritarianism. Vietnam has seen elite criticism of the ruling party and a spate of rural revolts. In Laos, the ruling party remains strong, but it has had to hold limited elections (from 1989) in order to establish a constitution (1991) and to regularize the legal framework. Burma remains a military-dominated dictatorship, but Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy, prevented from assembling parliament after their 1990 electoral victory, remain a significant focus of limited but continuing opposition. But these small gains are relatively insignificant when compared to the rejection of authoritarianism and military intervention in
Thailand and the Philippines, the overthrow of Suharto in Indonesia, and the internationally sponsored elections in Cambodia.\textsuperscript{10} At the same time, while there has been a continuation of electoral and constitutional rule in Singapore and Malaysia, the dominant parties and their leaders have continuously harassed opposition parties and individuals. Indeed, the latter systems might be referred to as ‘authoritarian democracies’.

In the following section it is intended to canvass the notion of ‘Asian-style’ democracy as a way of summarising the illiberal approaches to political space, democratization and representation, before examining the cases of Thailand and Indonesia as examples of recent progress in democratization.

‘Asian-style’ Democracy

The nationalist and anti-colonial movements included a diverse range of ideologies.\textsuperscript{11} An element that linked these was a shared distrust of the political arrangements associated with western liberalism. Many in the movements were attracted to western ideologies opposed to aspects of liberalism (for example, socialism and communism). Others, while attracted to the scientific, industrial and cultural advances of the West, were not particularly drawn to notions of elections, political contestation and open debate. While calls for democracy were an effective weapon against colonial rulers, there was no necessary commitment to liberal versions of democracy. In the post-colonial period this anti-liberal perspective has spawned a range of approaches to governance collectively referred to as ‘Asian-style’.

Democracy has been, and remains, a contested concept in Southeast Asia. Certainly, the authoritarian leaders have often sought to justify their regimes by describing them as ‘Asian-style democracies’. Many of the countries of Southeast Asia have experience of this ‘democracy’ – Thai-style democracy (Thailand), guided and \textit{pancasila} democracy in Indonesia, communitarian democracy in Singapore.\textsuperscript{12} Some of these have involved outright military dictatorship, as in Thailand under General Sarit Thanarat. However, the pervasiveness of discussions regarding ‘Asian-style’ democracy and ‘Asian values’ – and the notion that democracy is not culturally Asian – means that such ideas and practices deserve attention.

Some of the most articulate arguments concerning ‘Asian-style’ democracy and ‘Asian values’ have come from the leaders, officials and academics of Singapore and Malaysia. Chan Heng Chee\textsuperscript{13} has argued that liberal democracy is an ‘imposed category’, and part of a US policy of ‘exporting democracy’ based on the Anglo-American model. She concludes that Asian governments identified as ‘democratic’ display common characteristics, so different from those of the West that they constitute
distinctive ‘Asian democratic systems’:

- communitarianism – the group is more significant than the individual;
- authority – Asians display a greater respect for and acceptance of authority;
- longevity of ruling parties – dominant parties tend to remain in power for long periods; and
- strong states – prominent bureaucracies and development-oriented, interventionist states have been common.\(^{14}\)

Other commentators have suggested additions to this list, including ideas of patron-clientelism (related to communitarianism) and personalism.\(^{15}\) No matter how long the list, the tautology involved is clear – Asian democracy is what Asian regimes practice and then call democracy.\(^{16}\)

‘Asian-style’ democracy is not simply a rejection of liberalism, for it challenges ‘western-style’ democracy based on a rejection of many of the values seen to be associated with this ideology, in favour of ‘Asian values’. Singapore’s Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysia’s outspoken Prime Minister Dr Mohammed Mahathir have observed a link between what they see as a breakdown of social values and discipline in the West and liberal politics. The latter has argued that, ‘Too much democracy leads to homosexuality, moral decay, racial intolerance, economic decline and single-parent families’.\(^{17}\) Lee has firmly situated his critique in cultural terms, pressing a view which sees Confucianism as fundamental to ‘Asian values’, implying that the combination of liberalism and democracy may be alien to Asians.\(^{18}\)

Without entering the debate concerning the links between western liberalism and democracy, it is clear that many of the demands for the opening of political space, with calls for increased democracy in Southeast Asia, are not originating in the West or among western-influenced actors but have domestic causes. Like the military-backed leaders of the past, Lee and Mahathir argue for ‘Asian-style’ democracy because they wish to restrict the political space available to their citizens. They do this by maintaining electoral politics while rejecting freedoms and protections often associated with democratization in the West.

**Limiting Political Space in Singapore and Malaysia**

In Singapore, the PAP has been in power since 1959, with only limited opposition existing since 1968. Commenting on this, Chua Beng-Huat\(^ {19}\) observes that,
Regular general elections, of course, continue to be held as the sign, if not substance, of a democratic nation. However, substantively, the party continues to implement political procedures which in practice, if not in principle, concentrate and exercise a stranglehold on parliamentary and political power.

Rather than Singaporeans being enamoured with ‘Asian-style’ democracy and ‘Asian values’, it is clear that the state has ensured that political opposition is minimized through various corporatist strategies. The result is a remarkably narrow political space, carefully managed by the state, and all too obviously in the interests of the ruling PAP. This has been achieved by various strategies, including:

- co-optation of potential oppositions (for example, labour unions, academics);
- legalism, including the harassment and imprisonment of opposition figures; the use of laws to limit non-governmental organizations being involved in 'politics' and 'public policy'; controls on professional associations; the use of internal security laws;
- control of the media and censorship; and
- careful use of incentives (or their withdrawal) to prevent opposition (for example, through government grants, housing and employment).

The impact of these measures, and the PAP’s long domination, is that political contestation is limited, and political space remains remarkably narrow, defined by the state and infiltrated by it. The PAP state has attempted to co-opt and channel dissent through the party and its sanctioned organizations in order to pre-empt political reform. It is clear that the emphasis PAP ideologues place on ‘Asian-style democracy’ and ‘Asian values’ has little to do with cultural and political predisposition, and much more to do with PAP strategies to limit and control political space.

While the political space is somewhat broader in Malaysia, the ruling Barisan National has, under its leader and Prime Minister Dr Mahathir, also adopted measures to limit opposition. Regular elections, both national and state, have been held since independence in 1957. While opposition parties have more freedom and influence than their Singaporean counterparts, the dominant party has weighted the electoral system in its favour, and has used a range of measures to limit political space. These have included:

- co-optation, particularly through the wealth-generating business operations of the ruling party;
- politicization of the judiciary;
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- legal restrictions, including the use of internal security laws;
- increased control of the media and censorship; and
- the manipulation of ethnic and communal politics.

In contrast with Singapore, the state has had to permit the growth of non-governmental organizations and associations. Even so, the state has cracked down on these organizations, especially when they link with opposition parties, and a number of opposition leaders have faced harassment, arrest and imprisonment. Khoo Boo Teik argues that Dr Mahathir has never been enamoured of democratic means, and has ‘voiced a preference for authoritarian ways of government’. At the same time, he has been unable to establish a state that matches these desires. Jesudason is correct to suggest that any expansion of political space must be sanctioned by the state, but the state’s control of this space also faces challenges from citizens and groups who attempt to maintain it in the face of authoritarianism. While not always successful, it is clear that the struggle to maintain political openness has not been totally defeated in Malaysia.

Whereas Dr Mahathir has not had things all his own way on the broad political stage, he has been careful to control opposition within the ruling party. This has been demonstrated a number of times. In recent years he has tightened internal party procedures, and in 1998 moved against his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, who was expelled from the party, arrested and held under the draconian Internal Security Act.

Case has suggested that regimes such as that in Malaysia (and presumably Singapore), where regular elections are held, but only after much has been done to ensure ruling party victories, may be conceived as ‘semi-democratic’, a form of authoritarianism. Elections are important. As Jesudason notes, the ruling parties in Malaysia and Singapore gain an important degree of legitimacy from their adherence to aspects of electoral politics. This legitimacy allows coercion to be used as an effective political strategy. Indeed, this is the significance of the claim that these regimes practice ‘Asian-style’ democracy – it allows conservative regimes to constrain oppositions and maintain limited political space.

These regimes have been able to narrow political space; as discussed in the Introduction, they are examples of what has come to be called ‘low intensity democracy’. While there may be significant pessimism regarding further democratization in Malaysia and Singapore, it should not be forgotten that political space has ebbed and flowed throughout their histories; contemporary setbacks may herald a future expansion of political space. This has certainly been the case in the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand.
Expanding Political Space in Indonesia and Thailand

Authoritarianism appeared strong in Indonesia and Thailand in the early 1980s. In Indonesia, the ‘New Order’ regime, under President Suharto, had held power since 1966, and there had been a gradual narrowing of the political space available to the limited opposition that existed in the 1970s. In the late 1970s, Suharto had seen off challengers and developed a number of extra-constitutional instruments that further entrenched his rule.27 The media was well under control, while intellectuals and students were relatively quiet, and the economy was in good shape. Indeed, the political system provided an example of authoritarianism that looked very much like ‘Asian-style’ democracy.

Thailand also had a regime that was dominated by the military. In 1977 a military coup had brought General Kriangsak Chomanan to the prime ministership, replacing a highly authoritarian, civilian government. That civilian government resulted from another military coup, in 1976, which brought to an end the liberal or open politics of the 1973–76 period. All political dissent was forbidden and branded as communist, the elected parliament closed, and the media muzzled. One of the reasons for the 1977 military take-over related to splits within the military and on the conservative side of politics.28 Kriangsak’s administration began to heal some of these wounds. However, the military remained deeply suspicious of parliamentary politics. While the 1978 constitution allowed for extra-bureaucratic political involvement and elections were held in 1979, the appointed Senate had equal powers with the elected Assembly, meaning that the military maintained control of parliament.

In both countries the 1980s and 1990s have seen significant economic and political change. Both Indonesia and Thailand experienced economic booms through the two decades to 1997, albeit with a brief downturn in the mid-1980s.

While the trend to democratization is clearest for Thailand, it is apparent that, despite setbacks, the period has seen the political space expanded far beyond what might have been expected in 1980, and in some other parts of the region. By late 1998 significant changes had taken place. Suharto had gone after massive demonstrations, and while Indonesia’s ‘New Order’ regime remained in place, it was greatly weakened, allowing the most significant expansion of political space in more than 30 years. In Thailand, a new constitution, developed with public consultation, has been put in place. Although the parliamentary system risks debasement through the proliferation of ‘money politics’ (vote buying, pork-barrel politics, the power of political godfathers and the corruption of parties seeking electoral funds), there is now a broad space for political contestation. Why has there
been a transition in these two polities when authoritarianism had appeared so strong?

The Struggle for Political Space in Indonesia

The 1980s opened with a challenge from the so-called Group of 50 composed of intellectuals, lawyers, retired generals and students. This, however, appeared as an elite challenge to Suharto rather than a threat to the regime itself. But Suharto further entrenched the regime. He restricted the activities of the already tame opposition political parties, reaffirmed the security and political role of the armed forces, known as dwifungs, arranged another election victory for Golkar (the government party), and was himself reaffirmed in 1983 as President for a fourth term. Suharto also moved against potential oppositions in non-governmental organisations by requiring them to declare allegiance to the state ideology. By the mid-1980s,

Suharto stood at the apex of the pyramid; his appointees sat in each of the key executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government ...
His writ extended into every department and into every state-run corporation; it reached down, if he chose, to every village ...

Interestingly, this political control was asserted when economic problems were forcing economic change, including liberalization and market-oriented reforms. These reforms had a remarkable impact on economic power, and provided considerable impetus to political oppositions (see below).

The second half of the 1980s saw Suharto and his regime maintaining tight control. Golkar secured another embarrassingly large 73 per cent of the vote in the 1987 elections. In addition, controls and the co-optation of non-government organizations (NGOs) had been further strengthened. A period of rapid economic growth allowed the government to distribute economic benefits as incentives to potentially disgruntled political elements, effectively buying political stability.

This had allowed Suharto to move beyond his previous reliance on the armed forces, the Angkatan Bersenjata Republik Indonesia (ABRI), and it appears that criticism of Suharto emerged from within the armed forces and disgruntled members of the elite. Vatikiotis argues that the apparent openness that emerged at the end of the 1980s was a ‘by-product of palace politics’. The impact of limited elite competition was important, and there was certainly some destabilising speculation regarding the Suharto succession. At the same time, however, it should not be forgotten that there were other pressures for change, not all emanating from the presidential palace. MacIntyre has indicated other sources of restiveness, including a
number of state-sponsored interest groups, including business; sections of parliament, ABRI and Golkar members; students and intellectuals; the press; and some Islamic groups.34

Surprising many, Suharto responded by speaking of the need for political reform and more open debate. This led to a brief opening of political space, but did not result in gradual democratization. Instead, Suharto soon moved to reinstate tight control, stating that the existing system would not change. However, the political space, once granted, could not be entirely regained by the President. The opposition had become far more heterogeneous, and both middle class and working class organisations emerged to provide criticism of the regime.

1994 saw what Heryanto35 identifies as ‘historic events’ in ‘New Order’ Indonesia, challenging its hegemony: mass rallies of workers; a legal suit against the President lodged by a coalition of NGOs; and another suit against the government, for having closed a magazine, taken out by the magazine’s company. In fact, it was the June 1994 revocation of publishing licenses of three major Jakarta magazines that initially galvanized opposition. The closures were apparently related to disclosures regarding disputes between Suharto ministers, and to competition within the publishing industry. The government closure of these publications is seen by Chalmers36 as evidence of the government’s ability to curtail criticism. However, this downplays the significance of the unexpected response, which saw a series of protests in urban centres across the country. In fact, the protests were part of a series of events – including financial scandals, and labour unrest – which saw the government’s control challenged.

While the ‘New Order’ government continued to limit political space, it is clear that various elements of a diverse opposition were chipping away at the foundations of the state’s control. These foundations were also weakened by continuing rebellions in the islands of Aceh, East Timor and Irian Jaya and international criticism of the government’s human rights record in these and other areas. Kingsbury37 notes that domestic political contestation has come from a number of sources, including: as noted above, ABRI and the parliament, with elements of Golkar and the legal opposition; various Islamic organisations; and NGOs. To this might be added labour unions, intellectuals and students. Challenges from each of these arenas brought government crackdowns, but a relay of contestation appeared to have developed, allowing the opposition to continually harass the state and establish political space.

An example was the attempt by Megawati Sukarnoputri, daughter of Indonesia’s first president, to transform the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) from a tame government-approved opposition into a party that could challenge the government. She had promoted public discussion of
Indonesia's political future and encouraged a more open debate. Megawati gained considerable grass-roots support in Java. The government’s response was to have her removed as party leader, which saw massive demonstrations in her support, which in turn saw a heavy-handed repression, including the deaths of a number of activists. The government, as it had done in the past, invoked the communist bogey and argued that political stability was necessary for economic development.

While some Indonesia specialists regarded these events as illustrative of the strength of the regime, others make it clear that, while the state did remain powerful, political space had been expanded by the actions of the opposition. Certainly, the deadly game of cat-and-mouse continued as opposition groups challenged the government’s hegemony. Protests and riots were seen throughout the country, but the government appeared to remain resolute. While there was some apprehension within Golkar and ABRI, the party swept to another election victory in 1997, and it was assumed that Suharto would get yet another presidential term. It was at this time that the economy suffered its most serious setback in more than three decades.

The economic reforms and deregulation of the mid-1980s produced a rapid economic expansion that resulted in the increased dominance of large, predominantly Chinese-owned, conglomerates and groups owned by powerful political families, and especially the Suharto family. What emerged was a ‘shift of power from officials of the civil and military state apparatus to the political and economic coalitions surrounding the Suharto family’. The authority of the state was increasingly harnessed to the interests of the best connected politico-business coalitions.

This corruption of the political and economic spheres might have been ‘accepted’ during the boom, but when the economy collapsed there was a massive outpouring of resentment against the Suharto family and the political regime. Initially, Suharto appeared set to carry on, and he was again confirmed as president, with B.J. Habibie, his long time ally, as his deputy. Suharto accepted advice from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) but soon retreated from putting it into practice when it appeared that the interests of his family and business cronies would be adversely affected. He reacted by reshuffling cabinet and talking with some of the opposition. However, by bringing family members, trusted allies, and crony business buddies into the new cabinet, Suharto confirmed his determination to continue in power. But, the long discussed succession issue was soon upon Indonesia.

Suharto's survival strategy was rejected by a range of opposition groups united only in their desire to be rid of Suharto. Students led the opposition, and Amien Rais, leader of Muhammadiyah, a modernist Muslim
organisation, emerged as a spokesperson for the opposition. The reaction against Suharto was not easily controlled, and in the excitement Indonesia’s Chinese minority was treated as a scapegoat for the people’s sudden economic distress. However, there was also clear targeting of the Suharto family and crony businesses as part of the problem. Elements of ABRI appeared to have given approval to some actions against Suharto, but loyal ABRI units used considerable force to put down demonstrations by students. Ultimately they were unsuccessful, driving former Suharto supporters to break ranks and join the opposition. By mid-May it was clear that Suharto could only survive if the military was prepared to shed much blood. On 19 May 1998 Suharto resigned, handing over to Habibie.

Habibie is, of course, born of the ‘New Order’ regime, and his political tenure is probably limited. The transition may have had considerable orchestration by elements within the elite, but has not prevented reform and the expansion of political space. This includes: the release of some political prisoners, the possibility of concessions on East Timor, investigations of human rights abuses, and expanded space for the activities of unions, NGOs and opposition parties. While the political outcome following the ousting of Suharto remains unclear, for the moment, Indonesians have more political space than they have experienced at any time since the early 1960s, and the potential for further democratization remains.

Expanding Political Space in Thailand

The 1973–77 period had demonstrated that both ‘too much democracy and too much authoritarianism were dangerous … ’. Open politics was seen to have been chaotic, while the ultra-rightist reaction had boosted the communist insurgency; both threatened the conservative state. The compromise was ‘semi-democracy’ (in Thai, prachathippatai khrung bai), embodied in the 1978 constitution, where the military gained a legitimate role in a re-sculptured political system, which also recognised the involvement of extra-bureaucratic politicians.

The 1980 hand over of the premiership, from Kriangsak to General Prem Tinsulanonda, another military leader, reinforced this compromise. Thus the political system Prem presided over combined the military (which retained the premiership and controlled the Senate), technocrats (given overview of economic and financial policy), and political parties (having a minor cabinet and major parliamentary role). While the military appeared to have opened the door to electoral politics and political space expanded somewhat, the balance remained in its favour.

Changes and debates within the military were significant in moving the military away from ultra-rightist positions and in developing the ‘semi-democratic’ compromise. Challenges to the military’s political dominance
had come from the civilian politics of 1973–76, and from the communist insurgency. Groups within the military argued that the fight against communism would achieve better results through the promotion of democracy. But because the military was not convinced that elections could produce capable parliamentarians possessed of sufficient integrity, it was essential to establish a conservative polity. Supported by academics and conservative civilian politicians, the military determined that it needed to secure a long term political role for itself – not unlike *dwifungsi* in Indonesia.43 Prem remained Prime Minister from 1980 to 1988. During this period he faced two coup attempts from a small but powerful military clique known as the Young Turks. However, with strong support from the royal family, Prem maintained his position, and the ‘semi-democracy’ compromise was protected.

But remarkable changes were underway. In the security arena, the fear of communism had declined. The military had taken a strong anti-communist stand since the 1950s, protecting nation, religion and monarchy, and much of its political role had been justified in terms of the communist threat. Many of the controls over electoral politics and restrictions on political space had been justified by the need to prevent communists occupying this space. However, by the early 1980s, the supposed threat from China, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia appeared to have dissolved as these countries turned on each other. Internally, the communist insurgency that had appeared strong and threatening in the late 1970s, had imploded by the early 1980s. These were significant changes, and meant that the military’s security rhetoric became far less persuasive.

The period also witnessed remarkable economic change. The 1970s, and especially the 1980s, saw Thailand transformed from an agricultural economy to one where industrial and service sector activities dominated. The economy and society became far more diverse and complex. As the economic base expanded, a more complex division of labour demanded a greater range of human resource skills. In addition, rapid economic growth brought increased affluence and greater internationalisation as Thailand’s manufacturing sector became export-oriented and foreign investment expanded rapidly.44 This resulted in a Thai society that was far more diverse, and where economic power was firmly in the urbanized, and increasingly internationalized, private sector. Significantly, business had managed to extricate itself from its links it had established with the military in the 1950s and 1960s.45

Two sets of factors have assisted this. First, economic development and the growth of big business have meant that the old symbiotic relationships with military leaders are no longer necessary. State contracts became less important in a more diversified economic environment. At the same time,
the development of parliamentary politics meant that the military became less significant in cabinet during the 1980s, and business had to deal more with civilian politicians. Second, the military itself came to rely more on money-making activities in provincial areas, particularly in timber and mining, and on ‘commissions’ from arms and other equipment purchases. This contrasts with Indonesia, where ABRI’s influence extended into the economic sphere, as a product of the economic nationalism of the Sukarno years. However, in the ‘New Order’ period, business has come to be dominated by Chinese conglomerates close to Suharto and by his family and cronies, leading to splits between Suharto and sections of ABRI.

In Thailand, despite the expansion of the capitalist and middle classes, these groups did not exhibit any ‘natural’ enthusiasm for parliamentary politics. However, a number of factors suggested that ‘semi-democracy’ was no guarantee of stability or of the conservative state. First, the decline of threats mentioned above suggested that the military was no longer so central to the conservative state. Second, naked ambition was causing divisions and conflict within the military, and this was spilling into the wider political sphere. Two Young Turks coup attempts in 1981 and 1985, although unsuccessful had seriously challenged the status quo, including the monarchy. Third, the expansion of political space had seen the development of a range of civic organisations, which no longer seemed challenging. These included development NGOs, unions, environmental groups, and even organized business. Finally, Prime Minister Prem was unwilling to allow any challenge to his power from parliament.

When combined with the confidence that grew out of the economic boom and overflowed into political activity, ‘semi-democracy’ came to an end when Chatichai Choonhavan, an elected parliamentarian, became prime minister after the 1988 election. While Chatichai’s government was undoubtedly corrupt, its tenure was to prove a significant interlude in Thailand’s democratic history. Chatichai’s civilian government challenged the conservative state. It did this by establishing a regime where the operations of elected, civilian politicians and parliament opposed the notions that had previously defined legitimate power – order, stability, tradition, hierarchy and knowing one’s place in it, and unity. It promoted an increased plurality that directly challenged the conservative state. As Girling has noted, in the past officials have tended to define their interests as national interests, and have been unwilling to acknowledge democratic interests.

The conservative backlash came in February 1991, when the military again took power, closing parliament and narrowing political space, apparently casting aside many of the democratic gains of the previous decade. The military moved to entrench itself. While appointing a
government led by businessman Anand Panyarachun, the military maintained control while preparing a new constitution and establishing the framework for elections in March 1992. The new constitution meant a return to the ‘semi-democracy’, giving a nominated and military dominated Senate significant legislative and parliamentary powers. Significantly, it maintained that the prime minister be nominated by parliament, meaning that the post was not reserved for an elected Member of Parliament (MP). This ensured that the military could control parliament, no matter what the election produced. Unsurprisingly, after the election, 1991 coup leader and military chief, General Suchinda Kraprayoon, hastily ‘civilianized’, became prime minister. But this administration lasted only two months, resigning after massive and bloody demonstrations in May 1992.

The uprising against the military was a significant demonstration of the greater diversity of political activity. While the May 1992 events have been characterised as a middle class revolt, this has been shown to be too simple, as a wide range of Bangkok’s population – including workers, students and intellectuals, street traders, and business people – were involved. Even so, the popular perception of the middle class nature of the events is significant. The middle class did not object to the overthrow of the elected government in 1991, seeing it as corrupt and incompetent. Anek argues that the middle class had come to appreciate competence, integrity and honesty in government, but this does not necessarily require elections. When it was clear that the military lacked integrity, and was intent on cementing its political and economic position through deals with figures it had labelled ‘corrupt’, the middle class rejected the return to ‘semi-democracy’. Many from this class joined the demonstrations orchestrated by a coalition of NGOs, intellectuals and civilian political leaders. In contrast, organized business was slow in throwing its support behind the demonstrators. Pasuk notes that big business opposed the military only when it reached the conclusion that the military threatened business’s economic interests. 1992 was really the first time that big business gave open support to the institutions of parliamentary democracy.

The outcome of these tumultuous events was another election and a coalition government led by the apparently honest and long-serving MP, Chuan Leekpai. Chuan epitomized the middle class: a sober professional, with Sino-Thai ancestry, who had worked his way up the political ladder, and while not a particularly strong personality, a man of integrity. He led the country’s oldest political party, formed by monarchists in the mid-1940s, but now drawing support from the urban middle class. It appeared that the middle class had its government in place.

These events are often seen as representing the flowering of civil society. Certainly, political space has been greatly expanded, the military
has been sent to the barracks, and a new constitution promulgated. Thailand has now had three general elections since May 1992. That elected governments have come and gone without military intervention is a significant achievement. Large voter turnouts, and the great competitiveness of campaigning, suggest that there is a continuing support for the electoral process. It is also noteworthy that, while the relationship has sometimes been strained, elected governments have not acted to limit political space. Indeed, the media and various non-governmental groups have played significant roles in challenging governments, pointing to corruption and abuses of power. However, there has also been considerable disappointment with the electoral legacy of May 1992. Subsequent elections have indicated a massive reliance on the deployment of money to garner vote.\(^{52}\)

At the present time money politics, as defined earlier to include a variety of practices in addition to the buying of votes, threatens the electoral system. Further, the revolving-door nature of government is a cause for concern. The stability of parliamentary government remains to be established. Related to money politics is the polarisation that has emerged between the city and its business, middle and working classes, and the countryside, of relatively poor agriculturists. This division, characterised by wealth disparities and apparently different approaches to politics and elections, is looking increasingly like a class division. Bangkok voters blame their rural counterparts for electing corrupt governments, and are likely to see the logic of the electoral system stacked against the emergence of efficient 'clean' government. They consider rural people uneducated, oriented to personal relationships, focused on immediate material rewards, and narrowly local in their outlook. While this ignores the fact that corruption is as much an urban phenomenon as it is rural, the challenge to the legitimacy of the electoral and representative politics is real.

**Conclusion**

As indicated in the Introduction to this collection, a qualified pessimism regarding the difficult path to democratization pervades the literature. This study of Southeast Asia suggests that while this pessimism is well placed when looking at democratization, there are also reasons for qualified optimism when considering political space. In Brunei, Vietnam, Burma, and Laos, authoritarianism remains strong, but there have been some (very) limited openings for opposition perspectives. While authoritarian, Singapore has maintained a system of electoral democracy since independence. Likewise, Malaysia’s leaders appear keen to establish a system like that of Singapore, and the ruling coalition has been carefully
controlled. But, Dr Mahathir has been less successful in controlling all political space. Giving more cause for optimism has been the collapse of the Suharto government in Indonesia, and the consolidation of open politics in Thailand and the Philippines.

It is probably only in the Thailand and the Philippines where it is possible to observe encouragement for 'the expression of difference and a culture that welcomes opposition of views and beliefs ...'. However, with the clarity that derives from hindsight, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the political space available to oppositions has expanded over the last two decades in Southeast Asia. In addition, there are reasons for optimism for the future of maintenance and expansion of political space in the region. First, if democratic practice has not been particularly resilient in the region, political space has ebbed and flowed, and there appear to have been generalised gains in recent decades. Second, despite the current economic crisis, there has been significant economic development in the region in recent decades, embedding the capitalist state and capitalist dominance. This has seen the emergence of more diverse societies. Third, the economic crisis does not yet appear to have resulted in any winding back of political space. Indeed, it appears to have been a catalyst in expanding political space in Indonesia, at least in the short term.

NOTES

1. This study does not examine the Philippines. For further discussion, see the account by James Putzel in this collection.
2. See, for example, the essays in Anek Laothamatas (ed.), Democratization in Southeast and East Asia (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 1997).
10. At the time of writing, the political situation in Cambodia was in a state of flux following a second national election and violent disputes over the results.
11. Prior to this, some colonial leaders and the monarch in Thailand often railed against the
introduction of parliamentary representation, arguing that this was an 'Anglo-Saxon' idea and practice, that the people were ill-prepared through either education or experience for such freedom and responsibility - see, for example, comments by King Prajadhipok, Thailand's last absolute ruler, and his advisors, western as well as Siamese, reported in Benjamin A. Batson, *The End of the Absolute Monarchy in Siam* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp.283–307.


37. Kingsbury, op. cit., Ch.7.
38. For the former view see Chalmers op. cit, and for the latter see Heryanto, op. cit and Edward Aspinall, 'The Broadening Base of Political Opposition in Indonesia', in Rodan (ed.), op. cit., pp.215–40.
40. The observations made in this section owe much to several previous publications. The contributions of Surin Maisrikrod, author of 'The Making of Thai Democracy: A Study of Political Alliances Among the State, the Capitalists, and the Middle Class', in Anek (ed.), op. cit., pp.141–66, Garry Rodan and Richard Robison are gratefully acknowledged.
41. Prudhisan, op. cit., p.89.
42. This is not to say that the military was united in their response. The military was certainly split, but the factions that had become most politically influential favoured this approach. See Chai-Anan Samudawanija, Kusuma Snitwongse and Suchit Bunbongkarn, From Armed Suppression to Political Offensive: Attitudinal Transformation of Thai Military Officers Since 1976 (Institute of Security and International Studies, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, n.d.).
43. See Prudhisan, op. cit., pp.91–117.
47. See Kevin Hewison, 'Of Regimes, States and Pluralities: Thai Politics Enters the 1990s', in K. Hewison et al. (eds.), pp.159–89.
49. Members of Parliament and their ministerial leaders did much to bring themselves into disrepute. The initial popular enthusiasm for the Chatichai government was replaced by cynicism. By late 1990, almost everyone believed that the government was corrupt. This was confirmed in Chatichai's final cabinet reshuffle, conducted to further the financial interests of the coalition parties.