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Regionalisation and Political Development in Southeast Asia: Towards new modernism

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Abstract
Political development in Southeast Asia is re-written by regional elites. In the context of Southeast Asia, a series of interrelated ideological systems, including the formation of elite political consensus, is involved. The article argues that there are still long-term challenges in the construction of narrative-discourse systems for forming one's own identity and defining development space. This paper makes the case that the political spectrum in Southeast Asia does not simply reflect the liberal, conservative, political thought found in Europe, but rather represents a narrative system of civilizational integration based on the region's demands of the contemporary world.

Keywords: Southeast Asia; political development; modernity; regionalisation.

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1.0 Introduction

The theory of political development has been an epiphenomenon in comparative political science since its emergence; however, with the decay of political development worldwide in recent years, it is necessary to re-examine this theory (Wiatr, 2019). Western political development theorists have always viewed political development as a process by which developing countries move from traditional to modern societies, achieve citizen participation and enhance state capacity. The study of political development in this sense flourished at the time, but has since been subjected to sharp criticism and censure and has become increasingly dormant. However, liberal-democratic, universalist political development studies in the guise of behaviorism have been further continued by scholars such as Fukuyama, Huntington, Derrida, and others through the lens of universalist and pluralist political philosophy. In this century, with the rapid development of globalization, political development in developing countries has once again been pushed to the theoretical forefront of political science.

Elite relations in Southeast Asian countries can be measured in two ways: firstly, the composition and magnitude of the elite alliance, i.e., the scope of the ruling elites, such as the political elites, economic elites, community elites, and the middle class, etc.; and secondly,

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the degree of conflict among the ruling elites, such as the differences, contradictions, and struggles in terms of economic interests, ideology and governmental power. A comparison of elite relations in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines shows that the elite coalition in Malaysia has a wide range of composition, which is mainly composed of the National Front represented by UMNO; the elite coalition in Indonesia is mainly reflected in a broad and loose coalition of political parties; and the elite coalition in the Philippines is manifested in the nepotistic coalition dominated by the family elites. It should be added that elite relations in South-East Asia do not work in isolation but may also combine with other factors, such as the institutional environment, to contribute to the economic development of Southeast Asia in the aftermath of the financial crisis.

This article aims to explore the debate on regionalization and Southeast Asian political development from the dimensions of the ideological spectrum positioning of Southeast Asian political development, the value orientation of elites and the masses around the issue of modernity, and the priority choice of national development space. This article emphasizes that it is important that the construction of identity is based on civilization in the process of discourse-narrative system formation.

For a long time, the established intrinsic correlation between political development and regional integration has not attracted widespread scholarly attention. Over the past half-century, global political development and democratization reforms have shown a remarkable tendency towards geographical and gradual diffusion. Existing literature has not been able to adequately explain the political consequences in different regions and countries due to traditional perceptions of cultural similarities and geographic proximity. This article aims to clarify the underlying causes and different manifestations of political development in Southeast Asia.

2.0 Literature Review

The basic assumption of most of the classic Western social science literature on modernity after World War II is that the basic institutional patterns developed in European modernity, its modes of adjustment and integration, including the cultural project of modernity developed in the West, will be "naturally" absorbed by all societies undergoing modernization, albeit with regional variations. Despite regional differences, this project of modernity, with its hegemonic and homogenizing tendencies, will continue not only in the West, but will prevail throughout the world. After the end of the Cold War, while works such as Fukuyama's The End of History and Huntington's The Clash of Civilizations have shown that complex changes in history, ideology and culture have gone beyond the valve of political economy and have become the focus of modernization concerns.

One of the distinctive focuses of the scholarly debate around the paradigm of pluralistic modernity in recent years has been how modernity, political development, and external factors are related to each other. At least for the time being, a theoretical breakthrough is still being sought on the intrinsic logic of these issues: how Western forces have profoundly but slowly changed the process of political development in developing countries; and how Western forces, including transnational actors have constructed a "systemic web" to enhance transnational trade, investment, and service flows in line with their relations with developing countries. The analysis of the social conditions of modernization and democratization of the Western political development theory reveals the purposive and linear view of development and the socio-centered political logic.

3.0 Research Methodology

The research design of this article highlights the following two aspects: Firstly, it explores the close interaction between different states and actors in the regionalization process in Southeast Asia through the "comparative-structural" approach, that is, it observes the political practices of Southeast Asian countries in the process of regionalization from a comparative perspective in light of the convergence of multi-ethnic and multi-civilizational patterns in the Southeast Asian region under different historical periods, the construction of the regional landscape by traditional governance modes, the regional uniqueness of civilizations, and so on. The second focuses on the study of transnational forces in the Southeast Asian region, the study of ASEAN as a "people-oriented" practice of political development, and pioneering research based on civilization and geopolitical relations, emphasizing the "people-oriented" character of the political development process of Southeast Asian countries. The exploratory research in this article is an attempt to provide new logical thinking for the study of this topic, and to deduce a general hypothesis, which further deepened through more comparative case studies in order to deepen the scientific and rigorous correlation analysis between regionalization and political development. In this sense, the current paradigm of research on regionalization and political development in this article has contributed to the logical reconstruction of the correlation between the two issues.

4.0 The Evolution of the "ASEAN Way" in the Context of New Regionalism Development

For example, how ASEAN can break away from the "ASEAN way" and deal with the political crisis in Myanmar in a way that is acceptable to ASEAN member States and to the wider community is the key to ASEAN's constructive role. How to further adjust and revise the "ASEAN way" in the future will also be a test and challenge to ASEAN's political wisdom. Unlike Myanmar, the Philippines is an important constructor and leading force in ASEAN. The Philippines' identification with and pursuit of its Asian identity has enabled it to play an important role in the establishment of ASEAN. The Philippines' internal problems and its handling of these problems have enabled ASEAN to maintain a relatively flexible and open attitude towards its principle of non-interference in internal affairs. And the Philippines' concern for migrant labor issues in its own interest led, to some extent, to the establishment of the ASEAN socio-cultural community's rules and regulations. At present, the development of regionalization in Southeast Asia is moving toward a new regionalism (Roberts, 2012). Despite a series of challenges and crises in the development of regionalization in Southeast Asia in the mid- and late-1990s,

Southeast Asian countries have made significant progress in institution-building and regional cooperation under the leadership of ASEAN. In recent years, the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy is taking shape and being put into practice in the region to undergo profound changes. The "ASEAN way" based on flexibility, inclusiveness and flexible consultation is also undergoing deep adjustments.

The ASEAN-led regionalization process is facing the pressure of globalization and regionalization, which makes the regional elites begin to seriously consider the urgency and real challenges of regional social, political and security cooperation (Tan, S.S. 2016). Preserving ASEAN's centrality through multilateral fora like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the plethora of other ASEAN-anchored mechanisms can be understood as a way of maintaining ASEAN's relevance and capacity to manage the regional distribution of power (Greta, 2020:23). Compared to other regions in China's neighbourhood such as Northeast Asia, Central Asia and South Asia, Southeast Asia has the most diverse cooperation (political, economic and cultural) with China. Moreover, the centrality of ASEAN in regional multilateralism and its stated neutrality in great power competition adds to its geostrategic importance to China (Xue Gong, 2020:40). The "ASEAN Way" has gradually developed into a unique diplomatic model to guide ASEAN's internal and external relations, which emphasizes consultation and consensus decision making, non-interference policy, conflict management rather than conflict resolution, non-use of force and inclusivity. Although there are clearly differences of emphasis in adopting the principles of the ASEAN Way, the common elements and beliefs of the ASEAN Way can be encapsulated by five key elements. It is a framework which has evolved over a from the experience of dealing with challenges. As regional studies expert Amitav Acharya has emphasized, the ASEAN approach has helped to nurture Southeast Asian regional identities in a flexible and resilient manner across different political systems and historical and cultural contexts.

5.0 A Comparative Study of the Philippines and Myanmar

A comparative study of the Philippines and Burma can provide a clearer perspective on the logic of Southeast Asian countries in implementing issues such as national self-determination, national independence, regionalized development, and institution building (Dukalskis, 2017). Western colonial rule not only awakened nationalist thinking in Southeast Asian countries, but also pushed regional political elites to work together to create institutional designs that were appropriate to national conditions and regional development.

The Philippines, long under the influence of colonial rule and authoritarian regimes, provides a sample for the study of political development in Southeast Asia in the practice of regional integration. On the one hand, the regionalization of Southeast Asia in recent decades has provided a regional institutional environment for the Philippines to reconstruct domestic elite and public relations and decision-making systems, and has profoundly influenced the emergence and expansion of regional consciousness among Filipino elites; on the other hand, Filipino elites and transnational actors, who have developed significantly in the process of regionalization, have been expanding public discourse space around public concerns such as development, human rights, and democracy, in an effort to promote political development and transformation in the Philippines (Wong, 2013).

Firstly, the practice of regional integration has been a strong driver of the restructuring and reorganization of the Philippine elite alliance (Thompson, 2010). In the 1990s, the Philippines made great strides in promoting international investment and regional trade liberalization. As an important initiative to attract foreign investments, the Ramos administration enacted the Special Economic Zones Act in 1995, which aimed to strengthen the construction of some 40 special economic zones in the country. Data show that the total investment in the Special Economic Zones in the Philippines between 1995 and 2001 amounted to P7,676 billion. Of these investments, 39.6 per cent came from Japan, 17.3 per cent from the Philippines itself, 13.3 per cent from the United States, and 8.4 per cent from the Netherlands (Cororation, 1994). The increasing foreign investment has pushed the Philippine government to further introduce the Foreign Investment Act to fully liberalize investment and trade facilitation. In addition, over the years, the Philippines has improved its political, economic and legal systems to accelerate regional cooperation and improve the regional and national business environment. These reforms and increased external engagement have strengthened the Philippines' ability to resist the encroachment of foreign capital while creating a favorable public opinion for domestic liberalization reforms. On top of this, the Philippine government has taken advantage of the economic liberalization reforms to launch a series of policies and measures to promote private enterprise, which has greatly enhanced and optimized the institutional space for economic liberalization reforms in the Philippines. As some scholars have noted, as internal politics may play a role of gatekeeping or possibly guiding prospective investment, it may be prudent to promote potential projects that do more to uplift the general populous (Adam, 2022:101).

Second, in parallel with the process of regional integration and globalization, the Philippines has been engaged in the reform of its domestic political institutions and social organizations. In the case of the Philippines, the land reform program, industrialization strategy, and social security measures promoted during the decades of regional integration have been fundamental to the country's political development and modernity (Faustino, 1997). With the fall of the Marcos rule, the institutional space for political participation in the Philippines was greatly improved, and with the active political participation of the private sector and the emergence of forces representing different interest groups, classes, and industries, the Philippines in transition has seen a vibrant political climate and flourishing popular participation, as well as an accelerated reconfiguration of power at the central level and the mushrooming of non-governmental organizations. Overall, with the acceleration of regionalization in Southeast Asia, political groups and interest groups in the Philippines will be further divided and reorganized, and the era when the military elite and the privileged few controlled the country's politics is gone (Zhao, 2018).

Unlike the Philippine political development path, Myanmar, as a late participant in the regionalization of Southeast Asia, has explored and taken an extremely difficult path. Burma's growing integration into the region has been driven by a series of institutional designs at the political, economic and social levels, which have led to a reconfiguration and transformation of the relationship between the military

elite, the political elite and the general public in the country, further expanding the political participation of all sectors in the country and promoting a joint effort to build a domestic political development model (Chachavalpongpun, Prasse-Freeman & Strefford, 2020).

According to the understanding of Western academics and political elites, it is a serious test for Myanmar's military and political elites whether and how they can integrate into the regional economic cooperation process in an authoritarian regime that is generally considered to be "closed" for a long time (Steinberg, 2015). The country's active participation in international trade and production, as well as its integration into the regional economic cooperation process, has had a diverse and far-reaching impact on Burma's political life, and its international trade policy in the 1990s has had a positive and far-reaching impact on the country's political transformation, as seen in its political practice over the past two decades. According to statistics, Myanmar's total exports and imports reached US$472 million and US$880 million, respectively, in the mid-1990s; by 2005, they had climbed to US$3.5 billion and US$1.9 billion, respectively. In terms of trade structure, Myanmar reversed its long-standing trade deficit in 2002 and began to run a trade surplus, reaching a total of US$1.6 billion in 2005 (Thein, 2004).

Myanmar's active participation in international trade and investment has had a positive impact on the country's domestic political power structure. From the perspective of the factors of production, there has been a positive shift within the country toward greater control and influence of capital over the political power of the state, and trade policy reforms have greatly expanded the public space for popular participation in political life (Zhao, 2016). Despite long-standing pressure from strong international sanctions, in recent years the government has continued to tap into regional economic resources through trade with the outside community and has established close economic ties with some countries in the region, greatly enhancing the endogenous dynamics of institutional reform and political development (Haacke, 2008).

In general, Myanmar and the Philippines have different historical backgrounds and foundations for domestic political reform. Although Myanmar still face many internal and external risks and challenges on the road to future political development and modernization and reform, Myanmar's elites, through their active planning and participation in the regionalization process, have initially formed a consensus on domestic democracy, political development and regional integration reforms, which will profoundly promote Myanmar's political participation and political transformation. Table 1 shows long-term (2017-2022) trends in inward FDI, GDP and trade in services of Myanmar and the Philippines.

Table 1. Comparison of some economic development data between the Philippines and Myanmar （2017-2022）

Year	Myanmar			Philippines		
	Flows of Inward Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) (in million US$)	Gross domestic product, at current prices, in billions national currency (Kyat)	Trade in Services (in million US$)	Flows of Inward Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) （in million US$ ）	Gross domestic product, at current prices, in billions national currency (Peso)	Trade in Services (in million US$)
2017	4002.4	90,451	6698.51	10256.4	16,557	18837.68
2018	1609.8	92,789	8110.64	9948.6	18,265	20102.78
2019	1729.9	105,259	10316.58	8671.4	19,518	21818.21
2020	2205.6	112,770	7473.80	6822.1	17,939	5879.24
2021	1005.0	108,206	4273.10	11983.4	19,387	3861.84
2022	2980.9	—	—	9199.9	—	—

Source: Author's own elaboration based on ASEAN Secretariat Database.

Some studies have pointed out that recent trends in the Philippines show a decline in the quality of democracy (Jiwon Suh,2023:67-72). Although the Philippines has still not been able to achieve truly consolidated democratic institutions, the country's elite coalitions will further diverge and converge as the regional integration process advances. For such an archipelagic country, heavily influenced by Western forces, the mechanisms of political functioning in the Philippines around the distribution of power and wealth, the unity and preservation of nationhood, the rights of the individual, and the growth of civil society will increasingly demonstrate their functions and drive a fundamental change in the relationship between the elite and the masses.

Overall, this article has the following main research findings. First, the growth of Southeast Asian elites around regional development and modernity inherently contains a clearer logical thread, that is, how to achieve a high degree of compatibility between the will of the elites and the aspirations of the masses, in other words, how to organically integrate the thinking of regional elites on national political development into the deep expectations of the masses for national development and modernization. Secondly, in addition to the turn towards "people-oriented" political development in Southeast Asia, it needs to be scrutinized to what extent and in what field is the elite-led process of regional integration and political development compatible with mass-oriented political development. Finally, the combination and reconstruction from "elite ASEAN" to "popular ASEAN" reflects different conceptions of the "Southeast Asian world" in different contexts. In the face of the reconstruction of Southeast Asia in different scenarios, there is a heated debate between the elites and the masses. From the perspective of regional practice, this debate involves not only the specific path of economic integration, but also the evolution of regionalism and the direction and path of regional governance; it is not only about the efficiency of the internal decision-making mechanism of the country in the short term, but also involves a number of deep-rooted issues that require sustained attention.

6.0 Conclusion

The research in this article may contain unique theoretical value and practical significance. On the one hand, the analysis from the perspective of cultural relativism needs to ask what kind of evolutionary path has been and will be experienced in the history of Southeast Asia's political development, especially how to break away from the path since the future political path of Southeast Asia under the new historical orientation; on the other hand, the reflection on Southeast Asia's political development actually maps the political evolution of non-Western, less developed regions and countries.

This article attempts to break through the dichotomous research paradigm of political development by critically reflecting on the Western theory of political development, endeavoring to break the shackles of Western-centered thinking, and including Southeast Asia as a separate geo-political region in this paper's research horizon. Through the deconstruction of modernity and political development, which has a strong Western discourse, this paper reveals the paths and characteristics of Southeast Asian countries' attempts to find their own modernity; and then it strives to excavate the different historical traditions and political cultures of Southeast Asia, outlining the region's unique form of political development.

From an objective point of view, the parallel advancement with history and culture, and based on modernity and political development, is an important aspect of the process of forming the discourse narrative system of political transformation in Southeast Asia. For a region like Southeast Asia with large developmental differences and rich historical traditions, it is not only necessary to reconstruct a sovereign national identity in line with modern development trends and regional realities, but also to strengthen and highlight the civilizational belonging of the regional community based on regional cultures and ideas.

Admittedly, it needs to be seriously noted that this study still faces many theoretical challenges -given the fact that the current theoretical horizon has not yet been fully developed. Most Southeast Asian countries have their own unique economic foundation, cultural traditions, social class structure and social development goals. What the elites of Southeast Asia are trying to build is a narrative system of the world of the civilizations that is based on the historical characteristics of the region and the needs of the current reality. These are important issues that this paper has not been able to examine in depth.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper presents a framework for assessing regionalism from Southeast Asia political development perspective.

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