

BOOK REVIEW

THE SPECTRA OF AUTHORITARIANISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA



This book results from of a collaboration between SHAPE-SEA and academics/experts who focus on variants of authoritarian practices that hit countries in ASEAN. The discussion presented by the authors aims to identify, understand, and analyze the effects of authoritarian regimes on democratic life in ASEAN. In this regard, this book attempts to present how human rights and fundamental freedoms can be compromised, as well as how vulnerable groups are increasingly marginalized.

The topic of authoritarian regime practice is an exciting object of study. For example, Juan Linz discusses the difference between authoritarian and totalitarian methods. According to him, the difference between the two lies in the model of the political system. Totalitarianism focuses on the concentration of legitimate power, whereas authoritarianism represents a certain degree of political pluralism. This concept was then refined by Barbara Geddes. She distinguished three types of authoritarianism: concentration of power in one individual, military, single political party, or a combination of two or all existing characters.

From another perspective, Phillipe Nonet and Phillip Selznick describe a close correlation between law and the ruling regime. According to them, there are at least three law types: repressive law, autonomous law, and responsive law. Repressive law is a law born from an authoritarian regime and has to serve it. Autonomous law focuses on legal independence for authoritarian or repressive actions by the authorities. Meanwhile, responsive law is a type of law that is compatible with a democratic regime because it was born from community suggestions.

Various thoughts about this authoritarian practice are increasingly interesting because this phenomenon has re-emerged in the middle of a democratic government. In ASEAN, several countries such as Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines have experienced authoritarian regimes. After the wave of democracy that swept ASEAN during the late 90s, several of these countries were transformed into democratic countries. However, along the way, symptoms of the return of authoritarian regimes appear again. This authoritarian practice is poisonous in democracy because in an authoritarian regime, free and fair elections, the guarantee of human rights, and the protection of fundamental freedoms are things of the past. These various symptoms are analyzed in more depth by the authors in this book.

This book also discusses comprehensively how the correlation between authoritarian practices and human rights. In the beginning, this book discusses the application of international rules regarding human rights in each ASEAN country. Sriprapha Petcharamesree found that from various international treaties regulating

human rights, it turns out that not all ASEAN countries have ratified it. Only the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and their additions, have been ratified by all ASEAN countries.

The implementation of the ratification is also essential because it turns out that several countries differ in its execution. Therefore, the role of the National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) in each country is very vital. Jonathan Liljeblad found at least three typologies of state responses to NHRIs: state disregard, state co-optation, or state antagonism towards NHRIs. Of the three typologies, it reflects the state's desire to guarantee human rights and freedoms.

The following discussion is about the development of civil society under authoritarian regimes. Janjira Sombatpoonsiri provides instruments that characterize authoritarian practices: legal repression, which includes cyber laws & internet censorship, defamation laws, media ban & harassment of journalists, specific public assembly laws, security-related laws, and sedition laws; official registration & financial restriction of NGOs; and forcible repression, which includes Arrests/detentions, forced disappearances, imprisonments, the murder of leading dissidents and violent crackdown of protesters. Of these instruments, at least all countries have laws regarding cyber, internet blocking, and defamation laws. Sombatpoonsiri also argues that the narrowing of the public's role in authoritarian regimes is also influenced by the lack of legitimacy of civilian groups in government. The key reason for this is civil society's heavy reliance on rhetoric deemed by fellow citizens as 'Western.' As such, the rhetoric of freedom, rights, and diversity needs to be vernacularized so as to boost local ownership of these seemingly alien concepts.

This book also discusses explicitly authoritarian symptoms and practices in Indonesia. Deasy Simanjuntak found an interesting thesis regarding Joko Widodo's government, which was not an authoritarian form, but a pragmatic one. He compared it with the Soeharto's regime, which was far from democratic practices. The Jokowi administration still maintains a developed democratic climate, but few steps or policies tend to be authoritarian and pragmatic. For example, making K.H. Ma'ruf Amin who is the Chair of the MUI will become a vice presidential candidate in the 2019 elections; issuance of a public organization government regulation in lieu of law; and the criminalization of several activists who strongly criticized the government.

This discussion was also complemented by Muhamad Haripin, who focused on the military's role in an authoritarian regime. In the New Order, the military became a tool of government power to maintain government stability. Even the military has two functions ('dwifungsi' ABRI), namely in terms of defense and security as well as functions in government. However, with the fall of the New Order and reforms within ABRI (which later changed its name to TNI), ABRI's 'dwifungsi' has only become a history of the past.

The topic of media concerning authoritarian regimes is also discussed in this book. Pravit Rojanaphruk described how the Thai government responded to the development of social media. This development conflicts with the law governing the expression of opinions in public. Moreover, Thailand has The lèse majesté law, which protects the King from criticism and humiliation.

Finally, the discussion in this book is related to the implementation of elections. Elections are one of the main characteristics of a democratic country. However, the performance of elections and the results can have the potential to give birth to an

authoritarian regime. Eakpant Pindavanija describes the role of the Thai military in the coup and election implementation. The military victory in the elections in Thailand turned out to be an authoritarian government.

In Malaysia, Azmi Sharom describes the election from a different perspective. Although the military did not carry out a coup as in Thailand, the government's character that has long been in power has made itself authoritarian. The 2018 election is a historical record for Malaysia because since independence in 1957, the incumbent government has lost against the opposition coalition. The new government has not entirely reformed, especially in the field of law. Repressive laws are still used to silence dissent. The issue of religious freedom is also a challenge in itself in the development of democracy in Malaysia. These things should be an issue for every election to produce a more democratic government.

In conclusion, this book provides a comprehensive analysis to describe how authoritarianism is growing in a democratic government in ASEAN, although the discussion will be even richer if there is a part of each country's practices, not only Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. Therefore, this book is essential for academics, researchers, policymakers, civil society, and interested in this study.

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