



# ASEASUK NEWS

NEWSLETTER OF THE  
ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN  
STUDIES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

No. 46 AUTUMN 2009

ISSN 0952-3561

stomachs) and how they are accommodated. What about the Malay consumption of the internet where one finds an enormous variety of Islamic websites? What of forms of leisure other than shopping (tourism, pilgrimages, cinema, eating out, television, film, music) given the expanding market in Islamic-derived commodities and services and the commercialisation of Islam?

My plea for more information is not meant as a criticism of Fischer's work. After all his focus is shopping. He has made an important contribution to our understanding of Malay modernity and has given us a research agenda. But in exciting our interest we need to know much more and in more detail about consumption and the expanding role of Islamic-produced and -derived products in national and global economies. We might also look with profit at what is happening in Indonesia and the relations between Malaysian and Indonesian Islam, commerce and consumption.

---

DONALD K. EMMERSON (ed.)  
*Hard choices: security, democracy, and regionalism in Southeast Asia*  
Singapore: ISEAS, 2009  
xxi + 313 pp., appendix, index  
ISBN 978-981-230-914-3, pb US\$29.90

---

***Reviewed by Lee Jones  
Queen Mary, University of London***

As all the contributors to this volume reflect, the 1997-1998 financial crisis produced unprecedented domestic political upheaval in Southeast Asia and propelled ASEAN onto a course of cautious reinvention. It is therefore an extremely pressing task for analysts to

take stock of the last decade and update an increasingly weary literature on ASEAN by probing the relationships between security, democracy and regionalism. *Hard choices* is a collection of loosely but thematically-related essays by ten serious authors who each make interesting, useful and thought-provoking contributions. However, theoretical engagement is relatively sparse and the book would have benefited from an overarching framework to help structure and guide the contributions. Particularly given many contributors' focus on Myanmar, ASEAN's policies towards it, and ASEAN's recent institutional evolution, an early chapter agreeing a collective account of these matters would have left more space for analysis and argumentation.

The book's central chapters contain competing interpretations of the difference democratisation has made and might make to regional politics. On the optimistic side, Mely Cabellero-Anthony and (to a lesser extent) Jörn Dosch argue that democratisation has broken elites' grip over foreign policy, admitting new actors like civil society groups. This, they argue, has produced a new emphasis on democratisation and non-traditional security in ASEAN discourse, suggesting that a role for ASEAN in promoting democracy in countries like Myanmar may not be far-fetched. This message is reinforced by Kyaw Yin Hlaing and Erik Martinez Kuhonta, whose chapters on Myanmar both advocate a more forceful ASEAN line. (However, several of their recommendations have already been tried without success – a fact missed by those who reiterate the traditional view of ASEAN as hidebound by non-interference until very recently.) Kyaw's chapter also provides a useful and original account of Myanmar's internal deadlock,

bravely highlighting the intransigence and weakness of the opposition as a key factor.

On the less optimistic side, veteran ASEAN official Termsak Chalermphanupap provides a highly informative overview of ASEAN's institutional development which will be useful for all students of ASEAN. Termsak stresses the very real limitations to ASEAN's capacity for collective action, warning that the Association is so divided that using certain institutions could spell its demise; gradualism is the only route to successful reform. This contradicts those who, like Cabellero-Anthony, see the mere mention of new discursive terms as cause for hope. Whether ASEAN's new discourse and institutions matter will arguably depend on the outcome of struggles between those who want to use them to create social progress and those who simply want to refurbish ASEAN's tattered reputation with minimal actual change.

Simon Tay and Michael Malley's insightful chapters focus on specific issues – 'haze' and nuclear energy – to demonstrate that democratisation does not (as other contributors imply) automatically produce either more liberal policies or enhanced regional cooperation. Rather, they seem to argue, what matters more than democratic institutions is the forces mediated through them. In the case of Indonesian haze, for instance, venal bureaucratic and business interests currently overrule environmentalist groups, stifling regional cooperation. Democratisation can give vent to illiberal, nationalist and uncooperative sentiments, particularly when dominated (as ASEAN polities are) by cynical oligarchs.

It is disappointing, therefore, that none of the chapters engages in systematic analysis of the

domestic social forces at work in ASEAN states, which would provide many clues as democratisation's likely impact on security and regional cooperation. David Martin Jones comes closest to this in his chapter, but despite outlining the corrupt, oppressive nature of ASEAN's ruling classes, he comes down on the side of the demons, celebrating authoritarianism's capacity to adapt Southeast Asian societies to the vicissitudes of 'millenarian capital', claiming Southeast Asians have a 'cultural preference' for such arrangements, and thus ignoring Southeast Asians' own struggles for freedom and justice. It is unclear why Jones felt it necessary to add to his otherwise solid defence of 'pragmatic' regionalism, in recognition of ASEAN's fragility, a ringing endorsement of capitalist authoritarianism. Nor does he explain why ASEAN has committed itself to 'democracy' and 'good governance'.

On balance, the evidence in *Hard choices* seems to favour the pessimist viewpoint. The basis for concluding that civil society has shattered elites' monopoly on policymaking is rather weak. None of the pro-intervention authors sufficiently counter the pragmatist challenge that ASEAN coherence could not withstand the adoption of a more liberal-interventionist posture. However, this is a contingent judgement which should not lead us simply to endorse the status quo. As Kyaw, Tay and Malley's chapters imply, the fate of individual countries and the overall direction and content of ASEAN regionalism depends ultimately on the struggles of ASEAN's own citizens. A clear-sighted analysis of the respective strengths and weaknesses of the forces of movement and reaction, without succumbing to the defeatism of endorsing authoritarianism or the romanticism of believing that democratic institutions alone

societies of Southeast Asia should be confined within a regional perspective' (p. 17).

King says that writing this book was an 'arduous' process. I can't say that it shows. As is usual with his work, it shows an enviable fluency of argument and exposition. He also says that he is writing a second, companion text on culture and identity in the region.

---

HELEN E.S. NESADURAI & J. SOEDRADJAD

DJIWANDONO (eds)

*Southeast Asia in the global economy: securing competitiveness and social protection*

Singapore: ISEAS, 2009

247 pp + index; ISBN 978-981-230-823-8

hb US49.90

---

***Reviewed by Lee Jones  
Queen Mary, University of London***

The premise of this collection – the outcome of a 2005 workshop – is that Southeast Asian governments need to attend to the challenges faced by the emergence of other low-wage, relatively low-tech economies (notably, India and China), but also to those posed by the dislocating social impacts of globalisation. Nesadurai and Djiwandono rightly warn that while social protection is often seen as a threat to competitiveness, neglecting it may undermine the conditions necessary for capitalism to operate. The authors thus mostly try to have it both ways, claiming that ASEAN governments can respond to both threats simultaneously by enhancing welfare provision in a way that allows the value-added ladder to be scaled.

The most useful chapters are those by Rahul Sen and Sadhana Srivastava on India, and Liu

Yunhua on China. The former shows convincingly that India and ASEAN's economies are largely complementary, providing wide scope for cooperation and mutual benefit, and implies that India's significance to the region has the potential for serious growth. The latter provides a balanced assessment, noting the boost Chinese demand has provided for ASEAN economies and the benefits accruing from China's WTO-entry-related tariff reductions, but ultimately admitting the serious challenge China poses to Southeast Asia's share of global investment and export markets. Heribert Dieter contributes a critique of the recent penchant for bilateral FTAs, arguing that their complex rules of origin undermine firms' competitiveness. Chew Soon Beng and Rosalind Chew suggest that Singapore's mode of government-labour relations has positively impacted competitiveness, lamenting the more combative stance of unions elsewhere in the region. The remaining chapters consider labour regulations, pensions, and corporate social responsibility (CSR), mostly asserting (not always very convincingly) that enhancing social protections will not undermine competitiveness, and offering policy recommendations.

A grave weakness of the collection is that most of the authors pay insufficient attention to the political aspects of political economy. They tend to note apparently irrational policies, 'inefficiencies', 'capacity' deficiencies, etc., without really explaining why the prevailing arrangements exist. For example, to note the apparent-irrationality of bilateral FTAs is not to explain their proliferation – which arguably is more for political than economic reasons. This shortcoming is often reinforced by the use of quantitative methodologies which do not

seem to capture realities on the ground: counting words in company reports to determine CSR; measuring labour-friendliness using binary assessments of legal regimes, etc. Occasionally the chapters on social protection are forced to note unpleasant realities, such as the domination of pension funds by government officials and appointees with quite different priorities than ensuring the welfare of retirees, but they largely neglect the wider power relations in which social policy is determined and implemented. This means that their policy prescriptions are frequently technocratic and rather other-worldly given the region's political economy and the balance of forces within ASEAN societies. Thanks to its qualitative approach, Chew and Chew's chapter gives the best sense of these realities – which is ironic in light of their celebration of the Singaporean state's authoritarian relationship with workers – who are seen as 'strategic partners' in the government's quest for development, rather than as citizens, let alone people with a legitimate interest in challenging capitalist social relations.

A further weakness is the volume's recurrent obsession with Singapore. As the region's largest trading state, this is partly understandable, but the upshot is the relative neglect of ASEAN's markedly different other economies. Particularly unfortunate is the way the newer, poorer member-states are largely ignored, given prima facie evidence that their economies risk being seriously hollowed-out by China's rise, or being incorporated as low-value processing centres into the wider Chinese economy. The differential impact of the rise of China and India on different Southeast Asian economies is thus left underexplored, which is unhelpful for informing our understanding of intra-ASEAN political differences over this vital

development. Indeed, only Dieter's chapter pays much attention to intra-ASEAN tensions, despite various technical recommendations for regional cooperation which are therefore not underpinned by an assessment of political realities. Finally, much of the data is outdated, being drawn from 2004, or in one chapter's case, 2002; the present global financial crisis – which, after all, began in 2006 – is not mentioned.

Overall, the book's general value is probably limited to the chapters on India and China, which are useful reference points; otherwise it is likely to appeal mostly to scholars concerned with the literature on the chapter's particular topics.

---

WIL BURGHOORN, KAZUKI IWANAGA, CECILIA MILWERTZ & QI WANG (eds)

*Gender politics in Asia: women manoeuvring with dominant gender orders*

Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008

235 pp. ISBN 978 87 7694 015 7

pb £14.99

---

***Reviewed by Colette Balmain***

A series of case studies examining the mechanisms which women in the Philippines, Japan, Malaysia, China and Singapore, either confront and challenge or concede to the dominant patriarchal order on a micro-political level, *Gender politics in Asia* is a welcome addition to the fields of both gender studies and Asian studies.

Engaging in discourses around fashion and the female body, motherhood, religion, and consumerism, the case studies are careful to demonstrate the specific manner in which