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## Democratization and foreign policy in Southeast Asia: the case of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus

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## Democratization and foreign policy in Southeast Asia: the case of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus

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**Abstract** *Recent democratic transitions in Southeast Asia raise the question as to how we should theorize the relationship between democratization and foreign policy. Many scholars assume that more 'democratic' Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members pursue more 'liberal' policies than their less-democratic counterparts, but surprisingly little theoretical work investigates the connection. This article argues that such investigations tend to crumble under close scrutiny. Instead, it offers an alternative framework based on an analysis of how different socio-economic interests contend to shape foreign policy in ASEAN states and how these interests are able to organize politically to impose their preferences. The case study of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus, a regional network of legislators campaigning for liberal-interventionist policies on Myanmar, shows how it is these forces, and not the mere presence or absence of formally democratic institutions, that govern the political space available to those seeking to transform ASEAN states' policies.*

The task of balancing the interests between the more progressive and entrenched establishment interests is a delicate one. Foreign policy cannot get ahead of social factors. Foreign policy must reflect... the existing social structure altogether.  
Surin Pitsuwan, Thai Foreign Minister, 1997–2000 (1998)

Social structures, types, and attitudes are coins that do not readily melt.  
Joseph Schumpeter (1947, 12)

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Despite the persistence of authoritarian regimes, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region has not been immune from the 'third wave' of democratization. The last two decades have seen dramatic political transformations in the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand, as well as the ongoing *reformasi* struggle in Malaysia. How should we theorize the impact of such changes on foreign policy? Many scholars assume that democratization generates a more 'liberal' foreign policy, suggesting that ASEAN members at the 'democratic end

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of the spectrum' correspondingly differ from their less democratic counterparts on issues such as humanitarian intervention (McDougall 2001). Some identified the economic, social, and political upheavals of the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis as a 'democratic moment' that could pave the way for 'participatory regionalism' (Acharya 1999; 2003; Ferguson 2004), and even suggested that ASEAN could become a vehicle for democracy promotion (Emmerson 2007). One recent analysis argued that legislatures are playing the key role in shifting ASEAN foreign policies from a 'realist' to 'liberal' orientation (Dosch 2006). Another claims that democratization and the participation of NGOs in policy-making means 'the closed black box of high policymaking inside ASEAN has finally been cracked open' (Cabellero-Anthony 2009, 216–217).

This article critically assesses these ideas. The first part argues that the theoretical and empirical basis for such claims crumbles under close scrutiny, offering an alternative framework for analysis drawing on historical sociology. It suggests that a focus on the constellation of social forces underpinning regimes, and the conflicts over power and interest within them tells us more about state policy than the mere presence or absence of democratic institutions. The second part applies this framework to the case study of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC), a sub-regional alliance of legislators formed in 2004 to campaign for their governments to adopt liberal-interventionist policies on Myanmar (Burma). Drawing on interviews with legislators and others, it shows that the AIPMC's influence has been limited, and explains this by delineating the constraints emanating from the structure of socio-economic power in Southeast Asia, which is often decidedly unfavourable to liberal or participatory policymaking.

### **Democratization and foreign policy**

Given the spread of democratization, surprisingly little scholarly attention has been paid to its effects on foreign policy. What literature does exist seems quite ambivalent about its impact. The only comparative study to date found that democratization produced anything from continuity in Spanish policy to deteriorating inter-state relations in Africa (Kahler 1997). Democratic peace theorists have generally found that shared liberal ideology, rather than democratic institutions, produces pacific relationships, and that democratization can in fact generate more illiberal, bellicose behaviour (Mansfield and Snyder 1995; Malcolm and Pravda 1996; Chan 1997; Adamson 2001). However, constructivist scholarship on ASEAN states has tended to ignore this rather ambivalent record, assuming instead a direct link between democratization, liberalism and liberal foreign policies. The assumed rather than proven nature of these linkages reflects their basic theoretical preoccupation with inter-state normative development and socialization. Constructivists tend to introduce domestic politics only in an ad hoc fashion, to explain events that inter-state interaction cannot account for, such as divergence from ASEAN norms such as non-interference, or indeed the foundation of ASEAN itself (Acharya 2001, 49). For instance, Thai and Philippine support for an ASEAN-led intervention in East Timor is ascribed to their position at 'the democratic end of the spectrum' (McDougall 2001); likewise it is argued that, in criticising Myanmar, 'ASEAN politics have been driven by liberal norms'

(Katsumata 2003). However, many apparently 'liberal' policies emanate from countries where formal democracies harbour highly illiberal practices. Malaysia vigorously promoted ASEAN-led intervention in East Timor and proposed expelling Myanmar from ASEAN in 2003, for example; yet Thailand has often defended Myanmar's junta. This casts doubt on ad hoc explanations based on state 'identity'.

In a rare attempt to explain why democratization produces more liberal policies rather than merely asserting the link, Jörn Dosch (2006, 21–22, 46) argues that 'regime accountability' is a 'critical variable' in determining foreign policy and that the shift from 'statist' to 'pluralist' regimes has enabled legislators to shift foreign policy from a 'realist' to 'liberal' orientation. However, the evidence for this proposition is also weak. In Thailand, 'the hypothesis cannot be verified' (Dosch 2006, 51) since there is no evidence of legislators changing policy. In the Philippines, only the 1991 senatorial blocking of the Military Bases Agreement constitutes strong evidence; other legislative actions are toothless expressions of 'concern' or outright failures. After an initial burst of post-Suharto turf grabbing, Indonesia's parliament has merely offered 'advice' to the executive, largely supportive of long-established principles, for example pursuing a 'free and active' foreign policy and maintaining Indonesia's territorial integrity. Parliament is simply ignored in cases of disagreement, as when President Megawati was instructed to boycott East Timor's independence celebrations (Dosch 2006, 51–61). The lack of evidence for Dosch's theory reinforces democratic peace theory's implication that the mere presence of democratic institutions is insufficient to create a 'liberal' foreign policy.

An alternative approach draws on Liberal theory emphasizing the preferences of powerful domestic 'interest groups' as the principle determinant of policy (Moravcsik 1997). Etel Solingen (1998; 2004; 2005) argues that regime type matters less than who occupies the regime; shared preferences within and between 'ruling coalitions' in ASEAN has sustained 'liberal' outcomes like peace and economic cooperation. This emphasis approach offers a powerful explanation for cooperation between unlike regimes, and a significant advance on the relatively simplistic approaches described above. However, it also begs the question as to where the 'ruling coalitions' and their preferences come from, and how they are able to dominate ASEAN states. One answer might be that Southeast Asian regimes are not, in fact, true democracies. Scholars identify these regimes, like many third world democracies, as 'illiberal', branding them 'hybrids', 'quasi-authoritarian', 'semi-', 'pseudo-', or 'defective', democracies (Case 1996; 2001; Croissant 2003; 2004; Zakaria 2003). However, as Jayasuriya and Rodan (2007) point out, classifying ASEAN regimes like this merely evaluates them against an idealized Western benchmark of 'democracy'. It does not explain *why* they are semi-, pseudo-, defective, etc. While we cannot address this question fully here, I argue that the same conflicts over power that shape the way institutions work are also decisive in setting limitations for foreign policy formation. The nature of these conflicts can be grasped only historically.

Western theorists frequently argue that capitalism universally generates a middle class which, desiring political participation, becomes the bearer of liberal values and leads demands for democratization (Przeworski et al 2000). However, although Western capitalists sometimes found liberal ideology and democratic institutions advanced their interests, as Bellin (2000) notes, in late-developing

countries, capitalists are highly 'contingent democrats'. Southeast Asian bourgeoisies have been the historical *beneficiaries* of authoritarianism, which provided state-led economic development and rent-seeking opportunities while suppressing challenges from the lower classes. ASEAN's ruling classes have accordingly legitimized their rule less through appeals to liberal values than by providing economic growth and rising living standards. The middle classes have been largely dependent on these arrangements, with only a small radical fraction challenging the *status quo* (Robison and Goodman 1996; Rodan 1996; Jones 1998).

ASEAN's capitalists have supported democratization only when it has been conducive to their own interests, and have generally been able to translate their socio-economic domination into political domination and to capture formally democratic institutions. This consolidation of what we shall term 'oligarchic' domination has been possible because, contrary to liberal theory, which conceptualizes politics as a separate sphere from the economy, where legally free and equal citizens enjoy an equal capacity to form 'interest groups' and influence policy, as Dahl (1985, 55) observes, access to power is structured socio-economically:

Ownership and control contribute to the creation of great differences among citizens in wealth, income, status, skills, information, control over information and propaganda, access to political leaders... differences like these help in turn to generate significant inequalities among citizens in their capacities and opportunities for participating as political equals in governing the state.

Thus in Thailand, military rule was replaced by businessmen-politicians who used their enormous wealth to manipulate elections to achieve political power and sustain access to state largesse, with most political parties being little more than vehicles for leading personalities (Hewison 1996; McCargo 1997). In the Philippines, an elite-managed transition from the Marcos dictatorship to democracy, despite its early promise of land reform, left gross social inequalities intact. An oligarchy of a few hundred wealthy families continues to dominate politics through 'guns, goons and gold', the buying of votes from the impoverished masses for as little as 40 pesos (\$0.75) and using electoral fraud or outright violence to ensure their supremacy (Velasco 1997; Linantud 2005; Hutchison 2006). In Indonesia, another elite-managed transition allowed the Suharto-era elite largely to reorganize itself to dominate the new democratic institutions (Robison and Hadiz 2004; Ziegenhain 2008). In Cambodia, a United Nations (UN) Transitional Administration imposed the most liberal constitution in Southeast Asia, but the existing regime's patronage structures survived the transition to electoral competition, allowing its incumbents to maintain neo-patrimonial rule as the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) (Hughes 2003).

Forces struggling against oligarchic domination exist in all ASEAN states, including Philippine 'people power' movements, middle-class liberal-reformist parties such as the Democrats (Thailand), Keadilan and the Democratic Action Party (Malaysia) and the Sam Rainsy Party (Cambodia), and various NGOs. Under certain circumstances, they can force the creation of new institutions, which can exhibit surprising independence and potentially undermine oligarchic legitimacy (Rodan 2008). Political outcomes are, therefore, not predetermined: they depend on social and political struggle. However, such efforts face serious constraints. Philippine NGOs, for instance, have been granted a permanent role in local government, but their financial weakness draws them into pork-barrel politics, enabling their

cooptation by oligarchs (Reid 2006). As Francis Loh argues, the radical fraction of the middle class usually exercises significant influence only in alliance and compromise with forces from 'old politics' (Loh 2008). This is often possible only when oligarchic alliances fracture, such as during the fall of Suharto and the *reformasi* period in Malaysia. Consequently, one cannot simply assume that democratization generates a 'liberal' state or permits legislators free rein. States are not units with 'identities' or neutral places for legislative deliberation, but expressions of power, profoundly unequal terrains which, reflecting social inequalities, promote some interests while marginalizing others (Hewison, Robison and Rodan 1993, 4–5). It is this terrain we must delineate as we turn to our case study.

### **Measuring the space for participatory policymaking: the AIPMC**

The AIPMC is a network of national parliamentary caucuses founded from 2004–2005 in six ASEAN states: Malaysia, where the first caucus was formed; Cambodia; Indonesia; the Philippines; Singapore; and Thailand. Their uniform goal—to promote liberal-interventionist policies towards Myanmar—permits a controlled comparison of political space across the member countries.<sup>2</sup> This is an excellent way to explore the relationship between democratization and foreign policy, and to test Dosch's thesis about the role of liberal legislators. This section introduces the case before exploring each member-country setting in detail.

The AIPMC is arguably a 'hard' case, since it appears to corroborate Dosch's thesis, despite being overlooked in his book. One leading NGO argued that the AIPMC was the 'key driver' behind ASEAN forcing Myanmar to forgo its turn to chair the Association in 2005, achieving 'more in pressuring Burma during the seven months of its existence than ASEAN managed during eight years of constructive engagement' (AltSEAN 2005, 7). Since then, however, the AIPMC's calls to suspend Myanmar and subject it to UN Security Council intervention have gone unheeded by ASEAN states, casting doubt on its influence.

It is crucial to recall that the AIPMC did not emerge into a vacuum. ASEAN had in fact repeatedly staked its reputation on its ability to persuade Myanmar to liberalize via 'constructive engagement'. This approach paid dividends from 2000–2003 when relative moderates gained temporary ascendancy in Myanmar's military junta. However, an attack on opposition figurehead Aung San Suu Kyi's entourage at Depayin in May 2003 signalled a backlash from regime hard-liners, prompting Western countries to impose fresh sanctions and to threaten to boycott ASEAN. This threat to ASEAN's 'credibility' and economic well-being led its core members to push Myanmar to forfeit the chairmanship (Jones 2008, 279–282). One Australian diplomat argued that ASEAN governments had simply 'given their legislatures unusual licence to join to add to the pressure' (Woodard 2005). One AIPMC member agrees that many 'ASEAN leaders ... [were already] very cheesed off with the attitude of Burma ... the AIPMC ... helped these leaders to let out their frustrations openly'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For details of the AIPMC's positions and activities, see <<http://www.aseanmp.org>>.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Teresa Kok, Democratic Action Party (DAP) legislator (Malaysia), Kuala Lumpur, 27 January 2008.



The following country-specific sub-sections illustrate, however, that the space available to liberal legislators varies considerably. It is not simply determined by the presence or absence of democratic 'identity' or institutions: the AIPMC was welcomed in authoritarian Singapore yet marginalized in democratic Thailand. The main findings are as follows. First, liberal legislators have more space when oligarchic rule is incoherent. The country-by-country material is thus arranged on a spectrum ranging from most to least coherent. Second, however, their influence depends on whether their goals coincide with oligarchies' economic interests in specific instances. Third, liberal legislators often appear somewhat reluctant to challenge the oligarchic boundaries of democratic politics by mobilizing greater social force behind them.

### *Singapore*

Singapore has a highly coherent oligarchic regime providing little room for liberal legislators, but in this specific case, oligarchic economic interests favoured the creation of some highly policed space for the latter to operate within. The People's Action Party (PAP), by purging the political left and manipulating electoral and legal systems, has turned Singapore into an effective one-party state. The PAP elite straddles government and business, legitimized by an elitist, technocratic and meritocratic ideology (Rodan 2006). In a parliament that usually serves merely to rubber-stamp PAP *diktat*, AIPMC legislators formed a caucus, debated Myanmar, interrogated ministers and even mooted Myanmar's expulsion or Singapore's withdrawal from ASEAN. Rather than signifying the emergence of participatory policymaking, however, this illustrates the way PAP's domination of Singaporean society allows it to strategically relax political space to suit its own political and economic interests.

After the Cold War, Singapore encouraged gradualist change in Myanmar, pushing Singaporean businesses to invest in and trade with the country while arming and supplying its military and training its civil servants. Parliamentary criticism was impossible, as it would have run counter to PAP policy. By 2003, however, this policy had demonstrably failed. Many investors had been 'burnt' and Singapore was threatened by secondary US sanctions due to its longstanding financial dealings with the junta and its cronies, endangering its standing in world financial markets (Jones 2008, 273–274, 284). Myanmar's behaviour also threatened ASEAN's corporate image, in which Singapore has a strong stake. Parliament was thus unleashed to attack the junta in order to distance Singapore and PAP from it. Protests, usually illegal in Singapore, were even permitted outside Myanmar's embassy after the junta suppressed monk-led protests in September 2007. The official sponsorship of this Myanmar-bashing was illustrated when Foreign Minister George Yeo attended these protests. National caucus chair Charles Chong reports Yeo also thanked him for attacking Myanmar in the media and 'saying all the things I cannot say diplomatically'.<sup>4</sup> Singaporean officials have also encouraged the AIPMC elsewhere, telling Indonesian parliamentarians they were 'very happy with the caucus'.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Charles Chong, PAP legislator (Singapore), Singapore, 12 February 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Nursyahbani Katjasungkana, New Awakening Party legislator (Indonesia), Jakarta, 6 February 2008.

However, unleashing parliament against Myanmar also potentially allowed liberals to criticize practices that PAP used in Singapore itself. The space thus granted was therefore tightly policed. When leaders of the opposition Singapore Democratic Party tried to stage their own anti-Myanmar protests, they were promptly arrested (Asian Human Rights Council 2007). Burmese activists involved in persistent independent demonstrations have also been deported (Lwin 2008). Malaysian legislators noted that Singaporean Members of Parliament (MPs) were unable to criticize Myanmar for withholding freedoms also suppressed by PAP.<sup>6</sup> Parliament remained under PAP hegemony, unable to table a motion against Myanmar chairing ASEAN, and being first dutifully to ratify the 2007 ASEAN Charter, widely derided for its concessions to Myanmar. Singaporean parliamentarians trying to participate in the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Caucus on Good Governance (AIPCGG)—an initiative of the same Malaysian politicians who founded the AIPMC—were instructed by their foreign ministry to lower their profile for fear of offending the Malaysian government, good relations with which matter far more to PAP than with Myanmar. PAP's domination of Singaporean society thus allows it to selectively tolerate or create apparently participatory institutions that merely reinforce its own hegemony (Rodan 2008).

### *Cambodia*

Cambodia experiences very coherent oligarchic domination, but the oligarchy's reliance on foreign aid generates some minimal space for liberal legislators. As the Cold War wound down, incumbents of Cambodia's communist regime used their control over state enterprises and natural resources to create patronage networks and reconstitute themselves into the CPP to fight the 1993 UN-sponsored elections. Despite initial setbacks, the CPP's networks have withstood democratization and maintained oligarchic cohesion by sharing the spoils of the state and cultivating mass loyalty through development projects while manipulating elections (Hughes 2003). Thus, a senior opposition legislator, the SRP's Son Chhay, observes,

you have a new regime on a piece of paper, but the military still belongs to one party [i.e., the CPP], and the judges, the courts ... there is no check-and-balance ... Our parliament was so weak ... the police belonged to [CPP Prime Minister Hun Sen], the military belonged to him, the business community were [sic] so close to him ...<sup>7</sup>

However, the Cambodian oligarchy's reliance on foreign aid to finance its patrimonial development expenditure creates a different dynamic from that in Singapore:<sup>8</sup>

... the Hun Sen regime is very smart. They believed that they cannot show that kind of authoritarian rule on the surface. They have to allow some of the opposition certain areas, certain room to move around, just to present a fake kind of democracy to the international community, so they will continue to be accepted and legitimize their regime, and ... [receive] financial support to develop the country.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, Keadilan party legislator (Malaysia), Kuala Lumpur, 24 January 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Son Chhay, Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) legislator (Cambodia), 23 July 2008.

<sup>8</sup> In 2005, foreign aid constituted 112.6 per cent of Cambodian government expenditure (World Bank 2007, 348).

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Son Chhay, SRP legislator (Cambodia), 23 July 2008.



Son Chhay, who had just become chairman of the legislature's foreign affairs committee, argues 'permission' to form the caucus was simply 'part of [Hun Sen's] game', a concession to ensure that Son would not challenge the CPP on more important issues. Son was forced to appoint a CPP caucus vice-chair and admit other CPP legislators who retarded the caucus's activities, while the CPP speaker foiled attempts to debate or question ministers about Myanmar in parliament. The three or four caucus members (out of twenty-six) who are active can only hold private meetings and issue a few statements. Hun Sen's initial promise to stop siding with Myanmar in ASEAN's confrontations with the West was simply broken.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Cambodia reportedly supported Myanmar over its ASEAN chairmanship (Conde 2005). The caucus has thus not influenced government policy at all, simply helping the CPP regime to burnish its democratic image.

The CPP's dominance of socio-economic power, and thus Cambodian politics, creates severe limits on liberal foreign policy formation. In the 2008 elections, the SRP consolidated its hold on urban areas, but the CPP's virtual monopoly of patronage and violence in rural areas produced one-party parliamentary domination: the opposition lost all its legislative committee chairmanships and suffered massive defections to the CPP. Cambodian peasants, Son argues, are too economically distressed to support liberal policies: 'they are hungry, they think about their stomach all the time' and are kept 'ignorant ... easy to control' by a poor education system.<sup>11</sup> The appeal of the SRP's liberalism over the CPP's developmentalism, however, is arguably not enhanced by such attitudes towards the 'ignorant' masses. As Caroline Hughes (2003, 119–135) argues, many liberal Cambodian politicians are elitist, foreign-educated former exiles with weak roots in Cambodian society, and who apparently prefer demanding foreign intervention to overthrow the CPP to mobilizing their own people against the regime.

### *Malaysia*

Malaysia's ruling United Malay National Organization (UMNO) has historically provided very strong oligarchic coherence (Brownlee 2007), but its recent destabilization, coupled with the demise of oligarchic economic interests in Myanmar, has produced some concessions to liberal opponents. UMNO's dominance of post-independence Malaysia, achieved through media control, electoral manipulation and draconian legislation, has been legitimized through developmentalist ideology and racially-based policies of wealth redistribution. UMNO generated a dependent Malay business elite whose demands for and squabbles over state patronage came to dominate political life. However, the Asian financial crisis generated fierce competition within UMNO's networks, with one faction, led by Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, exposing massive government corruption and allying with middle-class protestors' demands for *reformasi* (Gomez 2002). The social conflict thus engendered persuaded UMNO to embark on 'good governance' reforms designed to shore up its legitimacy and restore investor confidence while leaving basic social structures intact (Rodan 2008). The AIPMC's latitude can be seen as part of UMNO's

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Son Chhay, SRP legislator (Cambodia), 23 July 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Son Chhay, SRP legislator (Cambodia), 23 July 2008.

'good governance' agenda, granted only after UMNO had won 92 per cent of parliamentary seats in the 2004 elections, decimating the liberal-reformist opposition. As one AIPMC founding member, the DAP's Teresa Kok, remarks, opposition legislators were still regarded as 'pariahs, outcast citizens', but 'now they [UMNO] won so big, they think that they should give more space to dissent [in parliament] ... it's safe for them to do so ... It would not only make the government look good, but they also started to believe there should be some form of check and balance within the administration'.<sup>12</sup>

A Myanmar caucus, specifically, was only possible because, as with Singapore, many UMNO-linked businesses pushed by former Prime Minister Mahathir to invest in Myanmar had long since withdrawn. Mahathir had even suggested Myanmar's expulsion from ASEAN (Jones 2008, 277–280). Since criticizing Myanmar now, says Kok, no longer 'affect[s] the power base of UMNO ... it is very safe for [even UMNO MPs] to be vocal', and any scepticism from Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar was swiftly overcome, especially after his mediation efforts in Myanmar in 2005 on behalf of ASEAN were rudely rebuffed.<sup>13</sup> According to AIPMC member Charles Chong, Syed Hamid told the Malaysian caucus leader that the government was 'equally disgusted' by Myanmar and inhibited only by 'diplomatic niceties ... he was glad that parliamentarians were saying a lot of things which they were constrained from saying'.<sup>14</sup> The AIPMC therefore arguably continues the tendency of Malaysian middle class activists to follow government foreign policy leads (eg on Palestine) since this 'allows them to proclaim that they are pursuing a moral cause while directing their attack at safe targets' (Jesudason 1996, 155).

The Malaysian government used the caucus to distinguish itself from Myanmar internationally by citing its pressure as a reason to deny Myanmar the ASEAN chair, thereby burnishing its own democratic credentials (Syed Hamid 2006). In practice, however, the space available to the opposition remained delineated by oligarchic preferences. UMNO imposed one of their own MPs, Zaid Ibrahim, as founding president of the AIPMC, in order to moderate its activities,<sup>15</sup> since, as in Singapore, unleashing criticism of a authoritarian regime potentially created more space to criticize UMNO's own illiberal practices. Furthermore, Kok explains that the continued business interests of some UMNO politicians and the state oil company in Myanmar mean that the AIPMC 'can't call for sanctions',<sup>16</sup> nor was the caucus able to pass a resolution against Myanmar chairing ASEAN. Malaysian business elites actually welcome the very negative externalities from Myanmar that liberals protest. Illegal Burmese migrants, for instance, constitute a cheap, pliant labour supply that NGOs claim was even used to construct Malaysia's federal capital.<sup>17</sup> The government has even been accused of involvement in trafficking in such migrants (US Congress 2009). Moreover, where oligarchic interests were more

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Teresa Kok, Democratic Action Party (DAP) legislator (Malaysia), 27 January 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Teresa Kok, DAP legislator (Malaysia), 27 January 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Charles Chong, PAP legislator (Singapore), 12 February 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, Keadilan party legislator (Malaysia), 24 January 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Teresa Kok, DAP legislator (Malaysia), 27 January 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Debbie Stothard, AltSEAN-Burma Coordinator, Bangkok, 29 January 2008.

directly at stake, opposition initiatives were swiftly quashed, as with parliamentary opposition leader Lim Kit Siang's proposal to establish a caucus on the violence in southern Thailand (Beh Lih Yi 2004). The failure of the AIPCGG, launched by the DAP in 2005, to achieve anything at all, reflects the gap between what UMNO and opposition legislators mean by 'good governance'. The former seeks superficial, re-legitimizing reforms, while the latter desire thoroughgoing change in Malaysia's political economy, which the dominant oligarchy cannot accept. However, the success of opposition parties in the 2008 elections, wherein UMNO's decades-long two-thirds parliamentary majority was broken, suggests that UMNO's 'good governance' reforms have failed to revitalize the party in the eyes of Malaysia's more progressive citizens. The opposition seemed even more surprised by this development than UMNO. Liberals such as Keadilan's Wan Azizah Wan Ismail had argued that the success of UMNO's paternalistic developmentalism meant that 'Malaysian society is rather apathetic' with little 'ideological' commitment to 'principled things' like human rights, 'because we're quite well off'.<sup>18</sup>

While partially accurate, such analyses also convey disdain for the materialistic masses, and this sometimes mingles with fear of mass mobilization for political purposes. Ismail, for instance, disagreed with Lim's proposed southern Thailand caucus, warning that it would 'trigger a lot of emotions' among Muslims, who might 'explode'. This would be 'very dangerous' and 'start something you can't really quell'.<sup>19</sup> But 2008's election suggested there is a growing constituency in Malaysia for more progressive politics. The crucial importance of oligarchic coherence was displayed in Anwar's post-election bid to encourage UMNO to split. This failed, but it remains to be seen whether UMNO can rebuild its mass appeal. Barring overtly authoritarian measures, a protracted struggle for hegemony appears likely, which will carry significant implications for the space available to liberal reformists in Malaysia.

### Thailand

Thailand's oligarchy is generally less coherent than Malaysia's, but the economic interests in Myanmar held by key oligarchic elements have significantly impeded the space available to liberal legislators. Competition between Thailand's business elites for the spoils of the state has precluded the emergence of a dominant party such as UMNO. The liberal, middle-class Democrat party has, therefore, often served in coalition governments with parties representing various factions of the business oligarchy, though the latter's overwhelming socio-economic power has frustrated many Democrat designs. However, the 1997 financial crisis threw the business class into disarray, allowing the Democrats to come to power via a deal brokered by the palace. A 'liberal' interlude followed, including a more hostile stance towards Myanmar, though still constrained by fears of a backlash from 'entrenched establishment interests' (Surin 1998). By 2000, however, the business class had recovered, reconstituting itself, for the first time almost *en bloc*, into the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party, fronted by telecommunications tycoon

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, Keadilan party legislator (Malaysia), 24 January 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, Keadilan party legislator (Malaysia), 24 January 2008.

Thaksin Shinawatra. It won a historically unique outright parliamentary majority by appealing to the rural poor, badly neglected by the Democrats (Hewison 2006). The victory was used to ride roughshod over the country's ostensibly liberal constitution and ruthlessly promote the interests of Thaksin and his businessman allies.

In this context of relative oligarchic coherence, the AIPMC was extremely weak in Thailand. National caucus leader Kraisak Choonhavan reveals that only three legislators joined and that Thaksin's government treated them with contempt. While, by 'twist[ing] their arms when they're eating noodles',<sup>20</sup> Kraisak got 77 senators to sign a petition asking the government to debate its Myanmar policy, this was simply rebuffed. Questioning government policy in committees was sometimes possible, 'but never in parliament . . . [Foreign Minister Surakiart] would answer me at 12 o'clock at night when most people are asleep—anyway, who cares, Burma?'<sup>21</sup> Little else could be achieved. Kraisak, now AIPMC's president, describes Thai capitalism as the main enemy of democracy:

Business with no respect for law, no respect for decency—greedy, and willing to do anything, even kill to get their projects going, to accumulate. This is built into the Thai political system, because it's so centralised . . . everybody lives off not the GNP but the budget, and permissions [i.e., permits] . . . even licences to do illegal businesses. . . . A businessman would kill you at the drop of a hat. He would kill you if you were protesting against something, when you are representing the community. I mean, he will kill you if you are in the opposite party during elections, the same businessman maybe.<sup>22</sup>

As in Malaysia, Thai capitalists positively welcome Myanmar's externalities. While the Democrats identified Burmese drugs as Thailand's primary security threat and authorized military action along the border, Thaksin replaced the architects of this policy in the state apparatus with his own cronies and launched a *domestic* 'war on drugs', arbitrarily killing over 2,000 people, including many TRT enemies. This proved enormously popular, despite isolated liberal protests (Pasuk and Baker 2004, 164–166). Likewise, Kraisak argues, Thai businessmen welcome Burmese migrants who they 'can hire and fire at will . . . [they] keep them completely off-balance . . . totally unrepresented . . . they hire policemen to do the job of suppression', and brutally put down strikes.<sup>23</sup> Thailand's fishing fleet, the fourth-largest in the world, northern construction firms, factories, and farms all rely heavily on often illegal Burmese labour.<sup>24</sup> Other Thai businessmen have used their wealth to seize political power to advance their material interests in ways inimical to the development of 'liberal' policies towards Myanmar. Thaksin, for instance, cultivated business in Myanmar for his telecommunications company in the mid-1990s while serving as Thailand's foreign minister, expanding them further after becoming prime minister (McCargo and Pathmanand 2005, 54–55; Pasuk and Baker 2004, 213).

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Kraisak Choonhavan, (Thailand), Bangkok, 29 January 2008. Under Thaksin, Kraisak was an independent senator. He is now the Democrats' deputy leader.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Kraisak Choonhavan, (Thailand) 29 January 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Kraisak Choonhavan, (Thailand) 29 January 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Kraisak Choonhavan, (Thailand), 29 January 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Kraisak Choonhavan, (Thailand), 29 January 2008.

Like his counterparts elsewhere, Kraisak blames the supine middle classes and the poverty of the lower classes:

People have become self-centred... consumerism ... has overwhelmed the country. That is all, in fact, that the bourgeoisie think about, to consume, to exploit as much as possible, with every government that comes in. If you look at the working class, they're in disarray... their conditions are very bad.

However, Kraisak also emphasizes the weakness of the Thai left, which 'has lost its soul almost completely', and the fact that the Democrats responded in a 'crude and quite conservative' fashion and did 'absolutely nothing' to address the needs of the rural poor anywhere outside their southern strongholds from 1997–2001.<sup>25</sup> The TRT network won the rural poor's support instead, producing repeated electoral victories. Liberals have so far been unable to win mass support to challenge the oligarchic delimitation of politics. Thaksin was only dislodged in 2006 by a military coup stemming from the TRT's fragmentation and Thaksin's intrusion on monarchical business interests (Connors and Hewison 2008). Yet the TRT's successor, the People's Power Party (PPP), retained the loyalty of the rural poor, returning to power in 2008. The Democrats again relied on palace-network manoeuvring and the highly illiberal 'People's Alliance for Democracy' protests to oust the PPP, and could return to power only in alliance with former TRT allies led by notorious political 'godfather' Newin Chidchob. As long as the Democrats rely on such means to attain power instead of mobilizing greater social force to challenge the oligarchs, the 'establishment interests' with which they must inevitably compromise will continue to restrict their scope for liberal policymaking.

### *Indonesia*

Since Suharto's fall from power, oligarchic rule in Indonesia has decreased markedly in coherence while significant elite economic interests in Myanmar have evaporated, creating significant space for liberal legislators to agitate on this issue. For decades, the New Order's institutional and ideological hegemony, buttressed by the cooptation or violent suppression of political challenges to state-led development, generated a vast network of crony capitalism in which Suharto served as the linchpin. This oligarchy reorganized itself to dominate Indonesia's post-Suharto democratic institutions (Robison and Hadiz 2004), forming new parties that lacked any distinguishing ideologies or grassroots structures as 'Trojan horses' of the old elite (Tan 2006). While many of the personnel essentially remained the same, without Suharto, the oligarchy nonetheless lost significant coherence, with one ex-minister describing the 2001–2004 Megawati administration as 'the New Order without the leadership and without the vision' (Huxley 2002, 25). Oligarchs now formally compete for political power, and the vacuity of their political agendas has opened up some space for liberal legislators to operate.

After the 2004 elections, 73 per cent of MPs were newcomers (Ziegenhain 2008, 207). Many were simply the oligarchy's next generation, but some were former academics, NGO activists and other representatives of the radical fraction of the

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Kraisak Choonhavan, (Thailand), 29 January 2008.



middle class. Some seized key positions in legislative committees, with Djoko Susilo and human rights activist Nursyahbani Katjasungkana, for instance, taking seats in Commission I for Foreign and Security Policy and Commission III on Human Rights respectively. Djoko states these particular newcomers sought to reverse the inward-looking nature of the crisis-ridden Indonesian elite and 'promote democracy and respect for human rights in region', by asserting parliamentary influence over 'the business of ASEAN', hitherto 'mainly in the hands of the ... executives'. Myanmar was used to advance this agenda.<sup>26</sup>

The specific institutional positions held by AIPMC's Indonesian members, and Djoko's personal networks in the foreign ministry, have enabled them to exercise influence disproportionate to the social force they command. In addition to issuing statements, inviting exiled Burmese MPs for hearings, and passing a resolution against Myanmar chairing ASEAN, Commission I's members also used their formal powers to block the acceptance of Myanmar's ambassador to Jakarta and delay the appointment of Indonesia's ambassador to Myanmar from late 2006 to early 2008.<sup>27</sup> Ratification of the ASEAN Charter was also significantly delayed due to concerns over its weak human rights provisions, with particular emphasis on Myanmar. Indonesia has subsequently taken the lead in trying to encourage Myanmar to democratize, sending special envoys and encouraging Chinese and Indian intervention (Jones 2008, 286). This seems to suggest these legislators have exercised significant influence.

Three caveats must, however, be noted. First, it is difficult to attribute causal power to AIPMC actions. Commission I's resolution opposing Myanmar's chairmanship of ASEAN came three months *after* Jakarta had already made its opposition clear (*Voice of America* 2005; Haacke 2006, 196). President Yudhoyono's attempt to initiate mediation in February 2005 occurred despite opposition from the caucus, with the government simply ignoring a petition signed by fifty-five legislators.<sup>28</sup> The AIPMC's preferred policies of suspending Myanmar from ASEAN and supporting UN intervention in Myanmar have been ignored, with Jakarta merely abstaining in a Security Council vote in November 2006. Jakarta has responded to a felt need to be seen to be 'doing something' about Myanmar, under both domestic and severe international pressure, but it has not done as the AIPMC wishes. Jakarta seems to have rather cynically appropriated the issue to try to reassert its long-lapsed regional leadership, explicitly recalling the glory days of Indonesian mediation in Cambodia (Khalik and Purba 2007). The AIPMC has thus been unable to impose its preferences. It may have exercised some influence, but perhaps only in combination with external pressures.

Second, AIPMC members still operate within oligarchic constraints. Such constraints are not necessarily inimical to stances on specific human rights and democracy issues abroad. Indeed, Indonesia's democratic image has permitted its army to restore military aid from the United States while it continued to violently

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with Dr Djoko Susilo, National Mandate Party legislator, Jakarta, 6 February 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Dr Djoko Susilo, National Mandate Party legislator, Jakarta, 6 February 2008. These constitutional powers were apparently never intended to be used in such fashion by the oligarchic elites who designed them (Ziegenhain 2008, 151).

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Dr Djoko Susilo, National Mandate Party legislator, Jakarta, 6 February 2008.



suppress challenges to its business interests in the country's outlying provinces (Emmerson 2006). Nursyahbani observes that 'most of the MPs are [only] interested in economic development', and Myanmar has simply become a 'safe issue for some MPs' because the evaporation of Suharto-linked business interests in Myanmar allows the maintenance of good relations with Western economic partners to be prioritized. Conversely, efforts to form an anti-corruption caucus were rejected by MPs in 2004, a caucus on 'good governance' was 'aborted' in 2005, and involvement with the AIPCGG has also yielded nothing due to the continued political dominance of corrupt oligarchs. Legislators cannot successfully agitate on 'issues that would endanger [politicians'] own positions'.<sup>29</sup> Liberal activism will thus be effectively constrained to relations with those countries in which oligarchs have no vested interests. Yudhoyono has emphasized Indonesia's *lack* of interest in Myanmar in his bid to mediate there.

Third, legislators' influence apparently hinges heavily on specific personalities and their institutional positions, which could easily change at the next election, given the massive fluctuations in party fortunes after 1997.<sup>30</sup> Nursyahbani argues liberal politicians and causes like Myanmar lack widespread appeal, blaming elites for failing to 'educate people about the fact Suharto is a dictator', and arguing the masses' economic distress leads them to romanticize the New Order period and 'think that civilians are not ready to govern'.<sup>31</sup> However, this is principally a function of the elite-managed transition to democracy. Even apparently 'liberal' opponents of Suharto such as Megawati Sukarnoputri and Amien Rais were New Order 'insiders' who sought to demobilize mass protests, favouring a 'pact of mutual protection' to preserve their own power (Robison and Hadiz 2004, 165–182, 241–244). As Nursyahbani recalls, the anti-Suharto movement bypassed 'labour, [the] urban poor community, all the people who suffered under Suharto'.<sup>32</sup> The legacy is their continued exclusion from politics. As in the Thai case, unless liberals are able to cultivate greater mass support, they will ultimately remain confined to a political system whose limits are determined by oligarchic preferences.

### *The Philippines*

The Philippines has the most fragmented oligarchy of any ASEAN state, and their absence of economic interests in Myanmar has afforded significant political space for liberal legislators to campaign. Although comprising fewer than twenty

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with Nursyahbani Katjasungkana, National Awakening Party legislator (Indonesia), 6 February 2008.

<sup>30</sup> In fact, as this article was going to press, official election results revealed that both Djoko Susilo and Nursyahbani Katjasungkana had lost their seats in the 2009 general elections as their parties suffered heavy losses to President Yudhoyono's Democratic Party: <<http://www.kpu.go.id/dmdocuments/DPR.pdf>>. This is a serious blow to the Indonesian caucus. Moreover, if, as expected, Yudhoyono is re-elected to the presidency, his control of the legislature is likely to be greatly enhanced. Should his Myanmar policy continue this would seem to reflect the pertinence of factors other than parliamentary activism.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Nursyahbani Katjasungkana, National Awakening Party legislator (Indonesia), 6 February 2008.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Nursyahbani Katjasungkana, National Awakening Party legislator (Indonesia), 6 February 2008.

members, of whom only four are particularly active, the Philippine caucus has been highly vigorous. Domestically, a non-binding senate resolution calling for Aung San Suu Kyi's release and stating Myanmar should only take the ASEAN chair if it showed signs of democratic progress, was passed unanimously in March 2005. Abroad, the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Association is being forced to consider admitting Myanmar's exiled MPs, and a successful Philippine resolution at the Inter-Parliamentary Union encourages foreign legislators to form their own caucuses and lobby their government to sanction Myanmar. Exiled Burmese MPs addressed a House of Representatives committee in August 2008, and the caucus is now lobbying the chairs of the House committees on foreign relations and inter-parliamentary affairs. The caucus's current president, Lorenzo Tañada, has also been made chair of the human rights committee.<sup>33</sup> President Arroyo has become a leading critic of Myanmar and repeatedly claimed her senate would refuse to ratify the ASEAN Charter before Suu Kyi's release. As with Indonesia, this appears to signify significant legislative influence on foreign policy.

Legislators' freedom of manoeuvre is a legacy of the historic inability of the Philippine elite to cohere into a party machine capable of functioning, like UMNO, to mediate their incessant squabbling over the material spoils of power (Brownlee 2007). This has kept the state extremely weak, with the US repeatedly 'rescuing' the state following its 'plunder' by oligarchs (Hutchcroft 1998, 30). However, the continued oligarchic domination of political, social and economic life means that political space remains subject to important restrictions similar to those in Indonesia.

Arroyo's domestic policy belies the liberal identity that her posturing on Myanmar is intended to convey. Arroyo has suppressed 'people power' uprisings against her corruption and electoral malfeasance, fended off repeated impeachment attempts by manipulating Congress, and presided over the resumption of brutal counter-insurgency warfare in Mindanao, the imprisonment of dissidents and rising human rights violations. Arroyo's oligarchic allies have backed such policies to preserve their access to the spoils of the state and preserve their own social power. As AIPMC senior advisor and former congresswoman Loretta Rosales observes, these same individuals can then back a 'liberal' Myanmar policy:

It's easier to support democracies in other countries where your own specific interests are not affected. So to call for the democratization of Burma and the unconditional release of Aung San Suu Kyi is something that is easy for the President to do... It doesn't affect her directly—her only interests are in the Philippines, internally. It's more difficult to call for democratic processes in the Philippines when her own specific interests are affected.<sup>34</sup>

Likewise, legislators can easily support AIPMC

because Burma is external to them... If it does not affect your concerns directly, then it's easier to be democratic. But if it affects your relations or your interests as an MP, your economic interests, *et cetera*, then you can be less democratic.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with Loretta Rosales, AIPMC Senior Adviser and former Akbayan Party Congresswoman, 7 August 2008.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Loretta Rosales, AIPMC Senior Adviser and former Akbayan Party Congresswoman (Philippines), 7 August 2008.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Loretta Rosales, AIPMC Senior Adviser and former Akbayan Party Congresswoman, 7 August 2008.

Criticizing Myanmar, where Philippine economic interests have never taken root, is thus cost-free. Indeed, it pleases Washington, the oligarchy's crucial external patron. This can be contrasted revealingly with Philippine policy towards East Timor in the 1990s, when the Ramos administration, supported by many leading parliamentarians and the Philippine-Indonesian Friendship Association, a front group combining legislators and businessmen, attempted forcibly to suppress NGO attempts to merely discuss Jakarta's occupation of East Timor. Here, not only had Jakarta helped broker a peace accord in Mindanao, but because the Philippine oligarchy's fortunes had become increasingly intertwined with those of Suharto's cronies, they thwarted any moves towards a 'liberal' policy on East Timor (Land 1994; Bello and De Guzman 1999). Likewise, Philippine legislators have shown little interest in the AIPCGG, since this would strike at their socio-economic power.

### Conclusion

This paper has argued that claims that democratization necessarily yields a more liberal foreign policy are difficult to sustain theoretically or empirically. Instead, attention has to be paid to how different socio-economic interests contend to shape and delimit formally 'democratic' institutions and their foreign policy outputs. The political space open to liberal legislators in ASEAN states is constrained by the socio-economic power of illiberal oligarchs, but it varies significantly depending on how politically coherent these oligarchies are. In Indonesia and the Philippines, relative oligarchic incoherence creates a political fluidity not found elsewhere in ASEAN. Malaysian and Thai liberals must depend on fractures within the oligarchic elite to exert leverage, while in Singapore and Cambodia, coherent, entrenched oligarchic rule offers little opportunity for 'participatory' policy-making by liberals. However, the available space also depends on the relationship between the specific campaign issue and oligarchic economic interests: their absence creates 'safe' issues for liberal agitation while their presence constrains political space. Indonesian and Philippine legislators' freedom to campaign on Myanmar does not extend to regional 'good governance' initiatives, for instance.

The framework advanced here is potentially applicable to any foreign policy issue. To pick up an earlier example, the decision of Thailand's Democrat government to take a major leadership role in the East Timor intervention was resisted by business elites (Agence France Presse 1999). This had far less to do with Timor than with business elites' broader struggle to resist the Democrats' reform programme and to recapture the Thai state, but did constrain the government's contributions to the intervention.

Working 'bottom up' from oligarchic interests can also produce fresh insights into regional politics, including economic regionalism (Nesadurai 2002). As Dosch (2006, 164) argues, 'despite the impressive volume of analysis, the discourse on Southeast Asian regionalism has not distinctly progressed' of late. He claims the 'unchanging nature of the analytical object' makes it 'difficult for students of ASEAN to add any new or original findings to the debate'. I would argue that this impasse is actually caused by an unproductive theoretical debate between constructivists and realists, whose most sophisticated representatives actually

share much in common and generate similar findings (Peou 2002). A greater focus on the way different social and economic interests organize to impose their goals offers one potential way through this impasse.

Such a focus reveals that the 'national interest'—always posited but rarely explained by realists—is actually the label given to the contingent outcome of domestic social conflicts, played out on fundamentally uneven terrain. These conflicts therefore deserve study in their own right and should not simply be glossed over. This is also the only way to understand why liberals' 'ruling coalitions' exist and are able to impose their 'preferences'. Likewise, simplistic emphasis on 'democratic' institutions or 'liberal' identity can be avoided. Finally, seeing the state as a site of struggle, rather than as a unit to be 'socialized' into transnational norms, is the only way to assess the chances of 'norm entrepreneurs'—seen by many constructivists as key agents of policy transformation (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Acharya 2004)—to effect political change. Directing our gaze away from a fixation on international institutions and towards domestic social conflict is a crucial step in understanding 'whose norms matter'.

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