

## Book Reviews

DOI: 10.1355/sj30-1j

*The Politics of Accountability in Southeast Asia: The Dominance of Moral Ideologies.* By Garry Rodan and Caroline Hughes. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 184 pp.

Particularly since the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis, most Southeast Asian governments have enacted extensive institutional reforms in the name of good governance, transparency, public participation and accountability. However, the resultant institutions have rarely challenged entrenched elites, with changes in the fundamental trajectory of political regimes remaining limited. *The Politics of Accountability* seeks to explain this puzzling outcome by focusing on institutions meant to provide accountability, such as human rights commissions, decentralized administrations, social accountability mechanisms and anti-corruption agencies.

Rodan and Hughes develop a universally applicable framework foregrounding the ideological nature of accountability politics and its political-economy context. “Accountability”, they argue, is subject to three dominant ideological framings, each of which advances different notions of authority: liberal, moral and democratic. Ideology is used to construct the political coalitions demanding and contesting accountability, and it thereby shapes the resultant institutions and their operation. Liberal ideology emphasizes institutional checks and balances to repel state intrusion into the private sphere; moral ideology holds rulers accountable against ethical codes; and democratic ideology subordinates elite power to popular sovereignty. Thus, “accountability” does not necessarily advance real democracy. It may instead pursue technocratic or moralistic interventions that actually leave fundamental underlying power relations untouched. Outcomes are determined, Rodan and Hughes argue, by dynamic socio-political conflicts rooted in historically determined political-

economy contexts. The context determines both which social forces exist as bearers of the three ideologies and the relative power of these forces. In Southeast Asia, the forcible disorganization of popular and leftist forces has left as the main political actors dominant, illiberal, oligarchic elites; relatively weak and contingently liberal and democratic middle-class NGOs; and conservative religious organizations. Accordingly, despite sporadic thrusts displaying liberal and democratic ideology, accountability campaigns are predominantly shaped by moral ideologies, which — far from challenging entrenched structural inequalities of power and wealth — can actually function in the interests of ruling elites. Five empirical chapters demonstrate this argument, each dealing with a different type of accountability institution.

*The Politics of Accountability* is extremely impressive in its scope, depth and sophistication. The empirical chapters are extraordinarily rich, making extensive and compelling use of interview data gathered during years of fieldwork. The framework significantly advances the “Murdoch school” of political analysis by foregrounding ideology, which has hitherto been relatively neglected. The overall argument is compelling, making a seminal contribution to our understanding of how institutional reforms can entrench rather than undermine existing regimes. The authors convincingly show, for example, how administrative decentralization is used to enhance the central authority of dominant parties, and how “social accountability” mechanisms channel middle-class NGOs into technocratic, non-confrontational activities that fail to build wider coalitions capable of challenging oligarchic domination. Thereby, demands for “accountability” become delinked from broader, democratic challenges to elite power that would generate truly significant social, political and economic change. This outcome clearly obtains elsewhere, including in Western countries where liberal ideologies arguably predominate, generating endless regulatory change but no alteration in regimes’ fundamental trajectories. Accordingly, *The Politics of Accountability* is of interest not merely to students of Southeast Asian politics, but also to those studying issues of accountability, transparency and democracy more broadly and to those interested in the specific kinds of institutions that

the book covers. It should also be required reading for accountability activists and external sponsors of governance reform, particularly overseas development agencies, who have much to learn here about how to reform their own practices.

The book might have been strengthened in two ways. First, Rodan's and Hughes's analytical framework, presented in Chapter One, is limited to elucidating the aforementioned threefold ideological distinction. The notion that political economy and social conflict structure outcomes is not developed theoretically, as part of this framework, but only empirically, with reference to Southeast Asia, in Chapter Two. This is unfortunate. While it is difficult to specify, in the abstract, how structural dynamics shape accountability politics, the failure to do so has deprived readers of a fully fledged theoretical apparatus and method that they could apply to other geographic contexts. Secondly, the chapters unevenly apply this framework. The best chapters, on decentralization and social accountability, are masterpieces of rigour. They systematically address the ideological rationales for particular modes of accountability, the political economy context, the coalitions contesting the accountability institutions and their ideologies, and the role of conflict among them in shaping the ways in which the institutions operate and determining whose authority they actually advance. Other chapters do not follow this analytical structure. Chapter Three, for instance, is largely chronological and comparative. Overly descriptive, it fails clearly to identify competing ideologies and their effect in shaping outcomes, particularly in Malaysia, where they seem to defy the structural context described in Chapter Two. At times, then, particular outcomes are insufficiently related to the forces said to determine them. However, that these criticisms simply express a desire to see an already compelling theoretical framework more fully developed and consistently applied is testament to this book's originality, scholarship and significance for scholars and policy actors alike.

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