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Introduction: New Forms of Voter Mobilization in Southeast Asia

Eva-Lotta E. Hedman and Andreas Ufen

Southeast Asia in the twenty-first century is no longer what it used to be, at least not at its ASEAN core. By the 1990s, competitive elections had (re)emerged as the primary mechanism for the assumption of state office in the Philippines and Thailand. By the turn of the century, Indonesia had experienced two orderly transfers of presidential power, as well as the country's freest and fairest elections since 1955. Meanwhile, opposition parties made strong showings in federal elections in Malaysia, seizing control over state assemblies and increasing their share of seats in the national legislature.

Of course, democracy has also remained intensely contested in these countries, including in ways that extend beyond more familiar forms of election campaigning and voter mobilization. The unresolved political crisis in Thailand is the most obvious case in point, prompting a return to extra-constitutional interventions by royalist military elements against an elected parliamentary government. Moreover, despite the recent build-up of pressure for change in Malaysia, its limited form of parliamentary rule remains firmly in place. While no Thai-style reversal or formal restriction of competitive elections and democratic institutions has occurred in Indonesia or the Philippines, the elected governments in Jakarta and Manila have faced charges of oligarchical rule, party cartels, corruption, and electoral fraud.

As the procedures and practices associated with democracy have gained greater traction in parts of Southeast Asia, they have also attracted growing interest from among political observers and analysts. This is evident in the proliferation of academic journal articles and book-length studies focused on elections and political parties in Southeast (and East) Asia in recent years.¹

Less obvious perhaps is the conceptual and methodological underpinnings common to many electoral studies, and the limitations thereof for advancing critical theory and empirical research. Conceptually, a familiar malaise seems to permeate the study of elections in Southeast Asia. The starting premise of several such studies tends to emphasize the comparative

1 See, for instance, the edited volumes by Taylor 1996; Nohlen, Hartmann, and Grotz 2001; Croissant, Bruns, and Johns 2002; Croissant and Martin 2006; Schaffer 2006; Chua 2007.

absence or weakness of what are deemed familiar ‘prerequisites’ for vigorous democratic procedures and practices – (‘real’) political parties, (‘proper’) party programmes, (‘genuine’) policy platforms. With the problem thus conceived, it is perhaps unsurprising that some of this recent literature also tends to show a marked preoccupation with institutional design and the improvement thereof (MacIntyre 2003; Andrews and Montinola 2004; Hicken 2009).

Methodologically, the importation of game theory and mathematical modeling tends to reinforce this trend towards “rendering technical” (Li 2007) the study of politics and elections in Southeast Asia. Such approaches to problematising political parties, party programmes, and policy platforms in Southeast Asian electoral studies have also anticipated the deployment of methods suitable for identifying quantitative indicators and statistical correlations. With the advances of game theory and mathematical modeling evident in political science and the study of elections elsewhere, the inroads of such methods into Southeast Asian electoral studies have thus also encouraged the wider circulation of a discourse of lack akin to that which framed much scholarship on the early post-Marcos Philippines (Hedman and Sidel 1999: 4).

Moreover, the preoccupation in Southeast Asian electoral studies with (the absence or weakness of) ‘real’ political parties, ‘proper’ political ideologies, and ‘genuine’ policy platforms has served to divert analytical attention from the nature and dynamics of voter mobilisation across the region. That is, even as professional campaign managers, media consultants and public opinion surveys have made considerable inroads into electoral politics in the region, “the study of elections in the Asia-Pacific remains stuck in a time-warp” (McCargo 2010: 24). This stands in marked contrast to new approaches to electoral studies in older democracies, many of which are characterised by declining party membership, crumbling political machines, and increasing attention to matters of ‘style’ rather than substance focused on politicians and parties. The response to such changing realities has seen electoral studies in older democracies turn to the lessons of political marketing for political science (e.g., Scammell 1999), prompting further research into, for example, political branding and the decline of urban machine politics (Pasotti 2009).

In Southeast Asia, political observers have noted a number of departures from more familiar forms of electoral campaigning. The most obvious case in point is Thailand, where the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra and the Thai Rak Thai party introduced elements of political marketing and a distinctly populist political platform in the 2001 and 2005 election campaigns (Phongpaichit and Baker 2008). More recently, the opposition coalition’s success in

denying the ruling National Front (*Barisan Nasional*) a two-thirds parliamentary majority in the 2008 elections has drawn attention to the role of new information technology and communication strategies on electoral campaigns in Malaysia (e.g., Suffian 2010). Indonesia has seen a surge of pollsters and consultants in successive elections since the transition from authoritarian rule (Mietzner 2009), as well as more commercialised, or market-oriented electoral campaigns (Bühler 2010). While there is comparatively more continuity observed in Philippine elections, there has been a marked increase in resources devoted to electoral campaigning on broadcast media, especially television (e.g., Florentino-Hofileña 2004), and, to a lesser extent, through information and communications technology such as the cell phone and the internet.

While such developments have attracted notice and commentary among observers, they also raise questions about the nature and processes of change in electoral campaigning, and their wider significance for the region's political regimes. For example, to what extent have the phenomena of "war rooms," "spin doctors," and election campaigns promoted by advertising agencies made inroads in Southeast Asia? Is there evidence to suggest that Southeast Asia is following the trajectory of political parties and campaigning observed in the older democracies of (Western) Europe and (North) America? Moreover, in what ways have mass media and new information and communications technology emerged as part and parcel of political campaigning across the region? Is it possible to discern wider trends of 'Americanization,' globalization and/or professionalization in the electoral campaign strategies emerging across Southeast Asia?

These are some of the questions that animate this special issue comprised of a collection of articles that, in distinct ways, shed light upon changing forms of voter mobilisation in each of the Asean four 'core' countries – Indonesia (Ufen), Malaysia (Liow and Pasuni), Thailand (Chattarakul), and the Philippines (Hedman). Individually and together, the articles show that changing forms of voter mobilisation must be understood within the wider context and dynamics of elections, as practiced in each of these four countries. In addition, they caution that the introduction of new electoral campaign methods and technologies may serve to modify and invigorate, rather than replace or weaken, more entrenched political dynamics and forces at work across the region.

The articles published here also highlight that, while campaign methods and technologies may often resemble those found in Europe or the United States, their adaptation across Southeast Asia results in novel and distinct dynamics. For example, bloggers have become members of parliament in Malaysia, while consultants have transformed an entire electioneering "mar-

ket” within a few years in Indonesia. Moreover, in Thailand canvassers mix “professional” with more “traditional” methods of voter mobilisation, while political candidates chase approval ratings in the polls at every stage of electoral campaigns in the Philippines.

This special issue aims to focus further research and analysis on these and related phenomena in the context of contemporary Southeast Asia, and perhaps elsewhere. In the first article, Andreas Ufen analyses the transformation of election campaigning and related changes to political parties in Indonesia. This is a comparatively neglected topic in academic research despite the marked rise of election-campaign managers and consultants, as well as so-called ‘pollsters’, in Indonesia after the fall of Suharto in 1998.

Ufen presents a three-stages model of electioneering to argue that campaigning has become at the same time more professionalized and commercialized. He identifies a number of key factors behind this transformation, including technological change, institutional reforms, political party de-alignment, and the extraordinary rise of pollsters and consultants. While the long suppression of electoral politics (from 1957 until 1998) served to decelerate the transition towards new forms of electioneering, Ufen argues, political parties are now tending to become market-oriented, electoral professional parties.

The second contribution to this special issue by Joseph Chinyong Liow and Afif Pasuni examine new media and its effects upon Malaysian politics and society. While the rise of new media in Malaysian elections dates back to the 1999 campaigns, Liow and Pasuni draw attention to the recent acceleration of this process. In this article, they trace the emergence of a variety of such new media, while also warning against excessive optimism as to the wider significance of such changes upon Malaysian politics.

The impressive performance of Malaysia’s political opposition parties in the 2008 general elections, Liow and Pasuni agree, owed a great deal to the new media of internet, mobile phones, alternative media websites and print publications. They also note that such media have emerged a fixture on the terrain of political communications in Malaysia, and deem it likely that their impact will increase over time. Focusing on key events in the aftermath of the 2008 elections, however, Liow and Pasuni argue that new media remain deeply embedded in familiar narratives of racial politics and Malay rights. As a result, they caution, new media serve at best as ambiguous bearers of a ‘new politics’ in Malaysia.

In the third article, Anyarat Chattharakul explores the dynamics of vote-canvassing and electoral campaigning in Thailand. To date, she notes, studies of Thai electoral politics have focused attention on the role of vote-canvassers primarily in the context of vote-buying without inquiring further

into the phenomenon of vote-canvasser networks. Here, Chattharakul draws on new empirical research from the 2005 general elections to advance our understanding of the nature of such vote-canvasser networks and their wider significance for winning elections in Thailand.

According to Chattharakul, a complex and hybridized form of electoral campaigning, blending old-style vote-canvasser networks with more recent techniques of political marketing, has developed in Thailand. Focusing closely on the internal mechanisms of a single election-campaign, she finds that vote-canvasser networks are underpinned by long-term dyadic relationships, both hierarchical and horizontal, between candidate, canvassers and voters. These are the networks, Chattharakul argues, that continue to be the most important factor in winning elections in rural and urban constituencies alike in Thailand.

In the fourth and final contribution to this special issue, Eva-Lotta Hedman considers the rise of public opinion and related changes to voter mobilization in the Philippines. Shifting the focus away from individual survey results and polling trends, or debates about the veracity thereof, Hedman instead points to the emergence of public opinion as a phenomenon in its own right. She argues that public opinion has gained greater circulation as political discourse and social fact in Philippine politics and society, with popularity and poll ratings of candidates, rather than the construction and maintenance of political machines, viewed as an increasingly effective and decisive mode of voter mobilization.

The quarter-century that has passed since the resurrection of democratic institutions and competitive elections in the Philippines, Hedman argues, presents a rather mixed picture in terms of new forms of voter mobilization. Here, she draws attention to how the underlying changes in the human geography of voters, the institutional framework for election, and the interest of the business class have all helped to expand the possibilities for such voter mobilization. However, she also identifies key constraints working against the realization of the transformative potential of ‘public opinion’ as it has come to complement – and compete with – money and machine politics.

In sum, this special issue seeks to shed light on some recent developments in forms of voter mobilisation and electoral campaigning in Southeast Asia, with individual articles focused on related themes in the context of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines. It is the result of an LSE IDEAS workshop on “Democratisation & New Voter Mobilisation in Southeast Asia” held in February 2010 at the London School of Economics and Political Science. It is hoped that this special issue will stimulate further research and analysis on changing forms of voter mobilisation, and the

significance thereof for democratic practice and governance, in Southeast Asia.

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