

# Lecture 3: Overview of Political Developments in Independent SEA

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# 1. Forms of Government in Southeast Asia

## 1.1 What forms of government existed in Southeast Asia?

- The term 'political structure' of a state refers to the legislative and executive institutions within a state (such as the military, bureaucracy, political parties and interest groups), their relations to one another, their patterns of interaction with one another, and the political regulations, laws and norms present in this political entity. In sum, these constitute the political landscape of a state.
- Two main types of political structures can be identified in independent Southeast Asian states:
  - a) **Democratic political structures:** These are characterised by plurality of institutions that do not necessarily share common value systems to coexist and share political power. In such structures, consensus is sought. Examples mainly comprise liberal or parliamentary democracies.
  - b) **Authoritarian governments:** These tend to concentrate political power in the hands of a select few. While the size of the ruling elite is significantly reduced, they wielded a high degree of influence. Governments are thus almost all-powerful.
    - Examples of forms of governments that practise authoritarianism to varying degrees: military, civilian, communist, monarchy, constitutional monarchy

## **2. Overview of Political Developments in Southeast Asia**

### **2.1 Different forms of Southeast Asian governments over time**

- Rather than treating each phase and the different governments as information to be memorised, consider the significant difference it would make if we remain curious about why particular forms of government emerged at specific times in Southeast Asia's history.
- Think also about why amidst the general trends of moving from democracy to authoritarian governments and, for some, back to democracy, there was no one 'right' way to consolidate power in the long term in Southeast Asia.
- Note that the following categorization is for you to identify patterns of change and continuities and is not in absolute terms. Southeast Asian states generally exhibited both democratic and authoritarian features of government than to fit perfectly under one categorisation. Thus the categorization is based on relative terms and the extent to which the government leaned more towards democracy or authoritarianism at each time period.

Paper 2: Developments in Southeast Asia  
(Independence – 2000)  
Theme I: Forming Nation-States- Establishing Political Structures and Legitimacy

<b>Southeast Asian states</b> (year of Independence)	Forms of Government (type of government, with <b>year</b> when the phase began if applicable)		
	<b>Initial Phase</b> (immediate post-independence)	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Phase</b>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Phase</b> (to 2000)
<b>The Philippines</b> ( <b>1946</b> )	Democracy <i>e.g. President Roxas, Quirino, Magsaysay</i>	Authoritarian Govt (Civilian Dictatorship, <b>1972</b> ) <i>e.g. President Marcos</i>	Democracy <b>1986</b> <i>e.g. President Aquino</i>
<b>Burma</b> ( <b>1948</b> )	Democracy <i>e.g. Prime Minister U Nu</i>	Authoritarian Govt (Military Dictatorship, <b>1962</b> ) <i>e.g. Prime Minister Ne Win</i>	Authoritarian Govt (Military Dictatorship, <b>1988</b> ) <i>e.g. Prime Minister Saw Maung</i>
<b>Indonesia</b> ( <b>1949</b> )	Democracy <i>e.g. President Sukarno</i>	Authoritarian Govt <i>e.g. Sukarno's Guided Democracy</i> <b>1957/1959</b> <i>e.g. President Suharto</i> <b>1966</b> <i>Military Dictatorship</i>	Transition to Democracy, <b>1998</b> <i>e.g. President B. J. Habibie</i>

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<b>Cambodia (1954)</b>	Authoritarian Govt (Traditional / Reformist monarchy) <i>e.g. King Sihanouk</i>	Authoritarian Govt (Totalitarian Communist, <b>1975</b> ) <i>e.g. Prime Minister Pol Pot</i>	UN-sponsored co- rule between rival factions ( <i>affected by war; political system not easily categorised, <b>1991</b></i> )
<b>North Vietnam (1954)</b>	Authoritarian Govt (Revolutionary / Communist) <i>e.g. President Ho Chi Minh</i>		Authoritarian Govt (Market-orientated Socialism, <b>1988</b> ) <i>e.g. Doi Moi Reforms</i>
<b>South Vietnam (1954-75)</b>	Authoritarian Govt affected by war- under the disguise of “democracy” (Dictatorship + Civil War) <i>e.g. President Ngo Dinh Diem</i>		<i>Not applicable (annexed by North Vietnam in <b>1975</b>)</i>
<b>Malaya (1957) / Malaysia (1963)</b>	Democracy <i>e.g. Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman</i>	Authoritarian Govt (Martial Law under NOC, <b>1969-1971</b> temporary)	Democracy with elements of Authoritarianism, <b>1971</b> <i>e.g. Prime Minister Abdul Razak</i>

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<b>Singapore</b> (1965)	Democracy with strong elements of Authoritarianism <i>e.g. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew</i>		Democratic Govt that <i>still contained</i> <i>elements of</i> Authoritarianism <i>but less</i> <i>authoritarian than</i> <i>before, 1990)</i>  <i>e.g. Prime Minister</i> <i>Goh Chok Tong</i>
<b>Thailand</b> (never colonized)	Authoritarian Govt (Dictatorship, <b>1948)</b>  <i>e.g. Prime</i> <i>Minister Phibun,</i> <i>Sarit, Thanom</i>	Democracy, <b>1973</b>  <i>e.g. Prime Minister</i> <i>Seni Pramoj</i>	<i>Democratic and</i> <i>authoritarian rule</i> <i>co-existing, 1976</i> (Increasing civilian leadership taking over from military leadership)  <i>e.g. Prime Minister</i> <i>Prem</i>

### 3. General Trends in Political Developments

#### 3.1 Two general trends in the political developments of Southeast Asian governments from independence to 2000

- Two developments are observed across the three phases of political developments in Southeast Asian countries since 1945:
  - a) **1st Phase: Formation of democratic governments** - Formation of government based on consensus and liberal (pluralist) politics, the leaders of which subject themselves periodically to account to the people.
  - b) **2nd Phase: A trend towards authoritarianism** - The other was a trend towards autocracy, leaders who basically placed themselves in power through various means and ruled alone or with a minimum of consultation, deciding what was best for the nation.

#### **A growing autocratic/authoritarian trend (late 1950s-60s)**

- The trend in the late 1950s-60s was a shift away from democratic politics & government towards one-man governments or at least government in which one strong figure, often a military leader, dominated the rest of the leadership.
- Thailand, which flirted ever so briefly with democratic & civilian government at war's end, was in 1948 the first of the SEA's countries to see the style of authoritarian government under Phibun Songkhram.
- This period from the late 1950s to 1960s was a time of adjustment for these newly independent nations.
- Democratic political forms were initially adopted in the immediate post-independence years for a wide variety of reasons, including the victory of the democratic Allies over the fascist Axis powers in World War II. These reasons very quickly lost their relevance in the post-war world.

- Analysis: Fundamentally, democratic politics would eventually be - for most of the new states of SEA - too drastic a break with the autocratic traditions of the region, both in pre-colonial traditional SEA culture and colonial practice (Western and Japanese).

c) **3rd phase:** However, towards the end of the syllabus timeframe of the year 2000, there was a **trend of Southeast Asian governments moving back towards democratic rule in some instances**. In this **3rd phase**, formerly authoritarian governments either relaxed their rule or were toppled in favour of less autocratic ones.

## 4. Factors for the Establishment of Different Forms of Government

### 4.1 Political developments in Southeast Asia: A confluence of internal and external factors

- It is rare for any historical event or outcome to be the **result of a single cause**. Conversely, historical events or outcomes tend to be products that emerge from a confluence of *multiple* causes and consequences. At the most basic level, it would thus make sense to acknowledge that **both internal and external factors shaped the different forms that Southeast Asian governments took over time**.
- **Internal factors** generally comprised but were not limited to:
  - a) **Decolonisation Experience:** Colonial rule established both the political boundaries of modern Southeast Asian states as well as the prevailing political institutions found within each of these states.



Colonial powers also played the role in nurturing local leaders towards their preferred political model.

- b) **Role of local leaders:** The colonial experience produced nationalist elites who contributed towards determining which form of government and system the state would favour and adopt.
  - c) **Role of the masses:** The colonial experience and Japanese Occupation gave rise to increasing political awareness and consciousness among the masses. People sought to influence the state's political structure through mass political participation e.g. formation of political parties/ organisations, voting in elections or participation in political demonstrations/ petitions.
  - d) **Regional traditional political culture:** Traditional patterns of patron-client relations or 'strong man' politics within Southeast Asia would in some cases serve as a basis for political legitimacy and shape political systems.
  - e) **The imperative of national survival:** National survival was a key concern for the newly independent Southeast Asian states. Whether the political stability and economic development necessary for national survival could be attained also influenced the dominance of institutions or preference for systems.
- **External factors** generally comprised but were not limited to:
    - a) **The Cold War context:** The Cold War influenced geopolitics within Southeast Asia. Superpower interests and their resulting influence and intervention would affect the nature and development of politics in some states (more about the role of the Cold War under section 6).

## 5. Introduction of Democratic and Authoritarian Governments

### 5.1 What forms of government were established in Southeast Asia?

- While most Southeast Asian countries, except for Vietnam, began as democracies, only Malaysia and Singapore retained that form of government for the entire duration of the post-independence period.
- At the same time, it is imperative to note that Malaysia and Singapore's style of governance contained strong elements of authoritarianism such as the way the incumbent party dealt with political challenges. Notably, Malaysia from 1969 to 1971 would be classified an authoritarian government under the National Operations Council.
- In a nutshell, Malaysia & Singapore **possess both democratic & authoritarian features.** It is thus important that we continue to see democracy and authoritarian government as existing along a spectrum where a government that is classified as a democracy can incorporate elements of authoritarianism to consolidate power and vice-versa.

### 5.2 First Phase: Formation of Democratic Governments

#### **Why did democracy seem to be a regional default system in the immediate post-independence years?**

- There was a sense of euphoria in the immediate post-war world favouring democracy.
- Also several Southeast Asian political elites that inherited power from retreating colonial rulers were Western-educated, hence Western

parliamentary democracy became a default system to implement in post-independence period.

- Exceptions: Cambodia, Vietnam

**Did democratic regimes after independence meet & survive the challenges of post-independence period?**

The experiment with democracy soon experienced various problems which would erode its credibility and appeal:

- a) As Southeast Asian leaders were generally inexperienced, they struggled to exercise control over the political and social forces and failed to implement economic policies that effectively contributed to growth for the country.
  - Consequently, many of the Southeast Asian governments that were formed at independence soon lost their political legitimacy.
- b) Newly-formed Southeast Asian governments faced challenges in trying to consolidate power
  - The mass mobilization of different groups within the same country during the Japanese Occupation and decolonisation contributed to this challenge.
  - They were beset with debilitating ethnic, regional and/or Communist tensions.
  - Fractious democratic institutions also rendered governments unable to function effectively and formulate coherent policies.
  - Consensus proved elusive, both between the people and the political elite, and between members of the political elite themselves.

- c) Democracy also failed to deliver economic development, despite Southeast Asian governments making it a priority in the immediate post-independence years.
- Independence offered the opportunity to undertake policies that were designed to benefit these states and not colonial metropolises<sup>1</sup>, but most Southeast Asian economies continued to stagnate.
  - Post-war economic conditions compounded the political challenges that newly-formed Southeast Asian governments faced
  - Prime examples of the health of the economy influencing the legitimacy of a government included Sukarno's Indonesia, Marcos' Philippines and Pridi's Thailand.
- d) In some Southeast Asian states, traditional patterns of politics (e.g. religious leaders, patron-client relations) were reasserted, and these served to reinforce divisions.
- Although democratic institutions and processes continued to exist within these states, their effectiveness was badly undermined by these rival forms of leadership patterns, e.g. elections served not to select the best candidates but to reward the candidates who succeeded in gaining the largest number of 'clients' who were then obligated to vote for him.
- e) Southeast Asian countries also witnessed disagreements between civilian and military leaders that posed a challenge to the consolidation of power.
- The most serious disagreement involved attempts by civilian leaders to limit the autonomy of the military, leading the military to respond with force especially when they had acquired a degree of legitimacy as they had fought in the battle for the country's independence.

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<sup>1</sup> The parent state of a colony.

- In the following countries, the military overthrew the existing government via a coup:
  - **Indonesia:** Sukarno tried to counterbalance the military by lending support to the communists when it suited his political interests to do so, but was eventually displaced by General Suharto.
  - **Burma:** General Ne Win disagreed with U Nu's more accommodating policies towards the ethnic minorities.
  - **Thailand:** Pridi cut out Phibun's military representation in government but still had to face the situation of the military threatening to storm the government when even the slightest disputes arose.

### 5.3 Second Phase: A trend towards authoritarianism

- Southeast Asian countries that began as democracies witnessed a shift to authoritarian governments by the turn of 1970:
  - **1947:** Thailand
  - **1959<sup>2</sup>:** Indonesia
  - **1962:** Burma
  - **1972:** The Philippines

#### What were the characteristics of Authoritarian Governments?

- Decision-making lay in the hands of a small elite and governments acquired the maximum influence possible. Alternative sources of power were kept relatively weak.

<sup>2</sup> Depending on which sources you consult, Guided Democracy can be seen as having begun in 1956, with the transition become more concrete following the declaration of martial law in 1957 and finally, the move to authoritarianism confirmed in 1959. Thus, it is common to find sources indicating any of the three years as the one when Indonesia became an authoritarian government under Guided Democracy, with 1957 and 1959 being the more common ones.

- State de-politicised public life in the name of stability in order to pursue national good without disruptions.
- Democratic attributes like separation and balance of power, multiplicity of political parties and proliferation of opposition groups were seen as inappropriate.

### **Case studies:**

#### The Philippines: Marcos' regime

- The underlying reasons for President Marcos' declaration of martial law in 1973 were dubious.
- He brought centralised power under bureaucrats and became a dictator to curb corruption and deal with a range of threats facing the Philippines, which did exist.
- But Marcos' "New Society" based on stability, economic growth and progress was actually a smokescreen for corruption

#### Indonesia: Suharto's regime

- Suharto was a technocrat who launched developmental projects such as housing and infrastructure, and generally improved the welfare for the people who did not live in politically restive areas like Aceh.
- The country was brought out of impoverishment in the 1990s, so Suharto's authoritarian government did bring benefits and some positive outcomes.

#### Why did SEA authoritarian Governments maintain parliamentary forms of government?

- A party system provides a veneer of legitimacy to dictatorial regimes

#### **5.4 Third Phase: Trend of moving back towards democratic rule in some instances**

- However, towards the end of the syllabus timeframe of the year 2000, there was a trend of Southeast Asian governments moving back towards democratic rule in some instances. In this 3rd phase, formerly authoritarian governments either relaxed their rule or were toppled in favour of less autocratic ones.

##### **Political systems by the late 1980s-90s**

- Even though the two systems (democracy and authoritarianism) differed starkly from each other, they did co-exist.
- There was always a possibility to change from one system to another, and to adopt policies more associated with another type of system (e.g., Communist governments adopting market capitalism and liberal democratic practices).
- This co-existence of elements from different forms of government within the same country became a reality from the late 1980s with the development of mass media spreading liberal and democratic messages, growing prosperity, and better education among the people.

## **6. Influence of Cold War Politics in Independent Southeast Asian States**

### **6.1 Battle between Communist and anti-Communist Forces**

a) Across independent Southeast Asia, governments encountered Communist subversion owing to Communism's appeal.

- Political and socio-economic discontent from which Communism originated remained a constant factor for as long as these circumstances existed.
- Most of the people were poor so Communism enjoyed a wide demographic base in SEA. To many, Communism promised a fairer society, land for peasants, and higher standards of living. It also possessed a systematic ideological basis to build a state upon, and a structure of resistance if the community was ruled by an exploitative government.
- In addition, political independence had not removed economic dependence on more industrialised states, and some governments sought Communism as an alternative developmental model that gave them more sovereignty.

b) In order to muster lasting support for their cause, Communist parties harnessed rural discontent and downplayed the ideological content of Communism by appealing to nationalism.

- Consequently, one of the more potent challenges to the prevailing political structures of the independent states of Southeast Asia was agrarian unrest, that was sharpened and broadened by the Communists into a contest for power against ruling governments and elites.
- In other cases, like Vietnam, the Communists played the leading role in the struggle for independence and nation-building from the start. Nationalism was precisely the unifying ideology Vietnamese



Communists leaders like Ho Chi Minh preached even before independence.

## **6.2 Fall in Appeal of Communism**

- However, Communism ultimately did not succeed in independent Southeast Asia. Communist uprisings were defeated and Communist governments changed their ruling policies away from it.
- This defeat was because of three fundamental reasons:
  - a) Traditional SEA cultural values prevented SEA peoples from developing class consciousness.
  - SEA peoples had difficulty accepting Communism's world view that was based on an antagonism between economic roles. Instead, they saw society in terms of patron-client relations and based on personal acquaintances. Many Southeast Asians were thus reluctant to identify with a 'working class', instead defined themselves in terms of ethnicity or geography.
  - Communism's hostility to religion also limited its appeal to SEA peoples who strongly held on to their traditional religions and cultures.
  - b) Rising prosperity steadily undermined the appeal of Communism over the decades.
  - By the end of the 1980s, SEA as a region was starting to emerge as an economic powerhouse while the international reputation of Communism was collapsing as Chinese, Soviet and Eastern European Communist governments enacted radical reforms that rejected doctrinaire Communist practices.
  - c) SEA nation-building and state repression also inhibited the effectiveness of Communist parties within independent Southeast Asia.
  - On one hand, these states successfully created national identities that were based on ethnicity, geography and/or religion, which diverted the people's attention away from critiques of the socio-economic structure

such as over unequal access to economic opportunities and income divides.

- On the other hand, Communist parties and their supporters were successfully suppressed through the use of legal restrictions and state-sanctioned violence. The firmness of these measures was aided in large part by the material aid and political support offered by the West (chiefly US but British aid was also significant for Malaysia and Singapore) in the Cold War context.
- In many examples, this foreign aid directly supported the domestic developments in these countries, serving to expand and develop the economy and raise standards of living e.g. Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and to a lesser extent Indonesia (in contrast this external help completely failed in South Vietnam).

## 7. Main factors to be examined for this topic

- As we move into the case studies in the next lecture, the following factors will be examined as we learn about how SEA governments consolidated power.
  - a) Role of **government leaders**: Approaches and capacity to consolidate power based on factors such as political ideology and nationalist credentials.
  - b) **Constitutional processes and elections**: distribution and exercise of political power in accordance with the constitution; avenues for political representation; popular mandate.
  - c) Use of the **military** to create order and stability.
  - d) **Traditional institutions**: traditional authority derived from the status of the monarchy and religious order in society.
  - e) **Government performance**: government's effectiveness in creating political order, social cohesion and economic growth.
  - f) **Political challenges**: Appeal of and support for Communist parties or for the military against existing governments, minority uprisings
  - g) **Popular opposition**: Rise of the middle class and student movements and calls for greater political participation.
  - h) **Strategies to manage political challenges and popular opposition**: use of the law; opposition crackdowns; institutional controls.
  - i) **Cold War Developments**: Governments' relations with the USA, USSR and China in obtaining political support and aid; external influence on local political developments