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Sovereignty and Stateness in Southeast Asia: A Comparative Historical Perspective

John T. Sidel

The incisive arguments and instructive examples offered with regard to sovereignty and stateness in South Asia in the Introduction and other essays in this theme issue are amply relevant to – and reminiscent of – the history and historiography of Southeast Asia in at least five ways. First of all, as in South Asia, the broad pattern of historical change in Southeast Asia has seemingly followed a linear trajectory of ‘state formation’ in which loosely structured polities are seen to have ‘evolved’ in the direction of centralized, bureaucratized forms of sovereign power located within – and monopolized by – modern territorial states. The basis of power, every student of Southeast Asian history is taught, has shifted from control over people – through charismatic authority, coercion, and chains of dependency – to control over territory, with forms of territorial control established and enforced by states.¹ In the place of ephemeral and unstable dynastic realms whose authority was inherently parcellized and partial and grew increasingly attenuated in line with geographical distance from the courts of the rulers, over time district officers and provincial governors regularly rotated in and out by the Ministry of the Interior in Bangkok, or Army commanders regularly rotated in and out by Armed Forces headquarters in Jakarta, or cadres regularly rotated in and out by the Communist Party in Hanoi, came to epitomize the uniformity and ubiquity of centralized state power and sovereignty in the region.

Secondly, more or less as in South Asia, the broad pattern of historical change in Southeast Asia is one in which the decisive conjuncture and catalyst for ‘state formation’ has been identified as the ‘Forward Movement’ of European colonization, peaking during the period which Eric Hobsbawm termed ‘the Age of Empire’ (1875-1914).² From 1874, riverine

¹ Reid and Brewster (eds.), *Slavery, Bondage, and Dependency in Southeast Asia*.

² Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*.

sultanates of the Malay Peninsula were reconfigured under the Federated Malay States (FMS), with British Residents overseeing the codification of laws and elaboration of bureaucratic institutions and procedures, even as their counterparts in much of the Netherlands East Indies were more or less simultaneously engaged in similar processes.³ Parallel developments likewise unfolded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in British ('Ministerial') Burma, in different ways in various parts of French *Indochine*, and, under an absolutizing monarchy rather than a colonial state, in Siam. But even here the story involved Europeans, with Prussian military instructors, Italian architects, French engineers, and British investment houses and industrial firms enabling the elaboration and consolidation of modern state power across the full breadth of what became Siam and later Thailand.⁴ This was the period which the British colonial civil servant – and critic of colonialism – memorably described (and hilariously derided) as that of 'the fashioning of Leviathan'.⁵

Thirdly, as in South Asia, the transformation of stateness and the triumph of the modern territorial form of state sovereignty have come to be intertwined with the telos of nationalist historiography. Here what Benedict Anderson calls 'official nationalism' has been at work, whether in conservative royalist accounts of the making of Thailand, or in the Communist Party of Vietnam's version of the reunification of the Vietnamese nation-state.⁶ But non-Southeast Asian scholars sympathetic to Southeast Asian nationalism have also played a crucial role in crafting a state-centered master narrative of modern Southeast Asian history around the emergence of nationalist consciousness, the unfolding of nationalist mobilization, the transition to national independence, and the onset of state-led nation-building and national development.

³ Amoroso, *Traditionalism*; Sutherland, *The Making of a Bureaucratic Elite*.

⁴ See, for example, Peleggi, *Lords of Things*.

⁵ Furnivall, "The Fashioning of Leviathan."

⁶ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, pp. 80-103.

Indeed, Anderson's account in *Imagined Communities* drew together disparate strands in this scholarly literature into a coherent template, in which the new kinds of administrative (and ancillary educational) circuitries and linguistic communications introduced by (colonial) states produced the bases for national(ist) imaginings.⁷ Even the as yet unfulfilled aspirations of today's secessionist – or rather national liberation – movements in the region have been similarly contextualized in terms of idiosyncratic 'wrinkles' in otherwise uniformly Andersonian patterns of colonial-era (proto-)national state formation. The makings of 'Igorot', 'Kachin', 'Moro', and 'Papuan' identities (and demands for autonomy or independence) in the postcolonial era, for example, have been traced back to the different – and differentiating – administrative arrangements for these populations established by otherwise centralizing, homogenizing, and thus inadvertently nationalizing colonial states.⁸

Fourthly, as in South Asia, the past few decades have witnessed an historiographical shift from largely celebratory accounts of the transformation of stateness and the triumph of sovereign state power in Southeast Asia to self-consciously corrective and critical treatments of the history of the region. On the one hand, along the lines suggested by Foucault, some scholars have endeavoured to construct 'genealogies' of the modern forms of biopower and governmentality bequeathed by colonial rule (and in the case of Siam, by indirect colonialism and internal colonization⁹), tracing not only the 'flattening of political terrain' alluded to in the Introduction to this Special Issue, but also various forms of internal differentiation as well. British colonial rule in the Federated Malay States, for example, produced sultans re-housed in Mughal-style palaces and re-styled as custodians of Islamic law and education,¹⁰ while Dutch

⁷ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, pp. 104-128.

⁸ Finin, *The Making of the Igorot*; Sadan, *Being and Becoming Kachin*; Hawkins, *Making Moros*; Rutherford, *Laughing at Leviathan*.

⁹ Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*.

¹⁰ Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*.

colonial rule on Java, by contrast, identified the local aristocracy with Javanese culture and accorded Islam institutional autonomy,¹¹ thus generating very different reinventions of ‘traditional’ authority and reconfigurations of religious life. French colonialism in *Indochine* created ‘Laos’, promoted coherence in Cambodia, and, through the promotion of print culture in the Romanized alphabet known as *quốc ngữ* enabled modern conceptions of shared Vietnamese identity to emerge, evolve, and expand.¹² Colonial classification, judicial and administrative segregation, and ghettoization of immigrants from southern China and their offspring produced ‘plural societies’ in which reified ethnic divides rendered differentiated forms of belonging, and, after independence, citizenship.¹³ Other colonial administrative arrangements reinforced the boundaries of ethnic identities, reconfigured the structures of religious authority, reworked ‘customary’ law, and reordered lowland-highland relations. By tracing the lasting legacies of these myriad colonial-era interventions, scholarly genealogies have re-illuminated contemporary Southeast Asia in a distinctly ‘postcolonial’ light.

On the other hand, against the perhaps inherently, if only implicitly and inadvertently, Eurocentric tendency to stress the strength and success, if not seamlessness of colonization in producing enduring legacies of stateness and modern state sovereignty across Southeast Asia, other scholars have emphasized indigenous idiosyncrasy, agency, and autonomy.¹⁴ Here the abiding commitment of ‘Southeast Asianists’ to defend the region’s integrity, authenticity, and autonomy against doubt, derision, and dissolution has inspired a rich literature on the diverse ‘pre-colonial’ polities of the region dating back into the first millennium of the Common Era, which has emphasized the distinctiveness of cognatic kinship, ‘charismatic kingship’, and

¹¹ Pemberton, *On the Subject of “Java”*.

¹² Edwards, *Cambodge*; Ivarsson, *Creating Laos*; Goscha, *Going Indochinese*.

¹³ Reid (ed.), *Sojourners and Settlers*; Chirot and Reid (eds.), *Essential Outsiders*.

¹⁴ Smail, “On the Possibility of an Autonomous History.”

indigenous conceptions of power.¹⁵ The historian Victor Lieberman, moreover, has produced a massive two-volume study which tracks the variegated pathways of state formation over the five centuries of the Early Modern Era (c. 1350-1850) while tracing commonalities and divergences vis-à-vis simultaneous developments and trends elsewhere across Eurasia.¹⁶ Thus the picture of Southeast Asia prior to the ‘Age of Empire’ is hardly a Eurocentric or Orientalist one of stagnation. Diversity and dynamism are stressed instead.

Furthermore, the historiography of European colonialism in its heyday is one replete with studies of the borderland and frontier areas of attenuated imperial authority, virtually autonomous communities as varied as Chinese mining *kongsi* in the Malay Peninsula and parts of Borneo,¹⁷ the upland peoples of what James C. Scott calls Zomia,¹⁸ and the nomadic seafarers and smugglers in and around the Indonesian, Malay, and Philippine archipelagos.¹⁹ Even the rise and fall of the Sulu Sultanate, which remained independent until its absorption into the American colonial Philippines in the early 1900s, has been carefully researched and reconstructed.²⁰ Overall, historians have painted a picture of colonial-era state-making in Southeast Asia which is messy rather than monochrome, stressing tax-farming and sub-contracted forms of policing rather than seamless centralization.²¹ French *Indochine* consisted of separate administrative arrangements not only for Laos and Cambodia, but also for Cochinchina, Annam, and Tonkin.²² What is sometimes glossed as ‘British Malaya’ was in

¹⁵ Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region*.

¹⁶ Lieberman, *Strange Parallels, Volume 1*; Lieberman, *Strange Parallels, Volume 2*.

¹⁷ Trocki, *Prince of Pirates*; Somers Heidhues, *Goldiggers, Farmers, and Traders*.

¹⁸ Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*.

¹⁹ Warren, *Iranun and Balangingi*; Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders*.

²⁰ Warren, *The Sulu Zone*.

²¹ Butcher and Dick (eds.), *The Rise and Fall of Revenue Farming*.

²² Sasges, *Imperial Intoxication*.

reality a kind of residual hodgepodge of Crown Colonies, Federated and Unfederated Malay States, and three separate realms across the northern shelf of Borneo and Brunei, whose potential coherence and consolidation only came into view – and into partial effect – once Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand were unified as such.

Fifthly and finally, much as in South Asia, the history of postcolonial Southeast Asia has been replete with instances of ‘multiple’ or ‘shared’ sovereignty and other transgressions of the model of seamlessly consolidated nation-states and national borders. Indeed, the very struggles for independence themselves which (re)produced modern territorial forms of power as nation-states often relied on safe havens and sites of refuge, solidarity networks and sources of assistance beyond the borders of the nations-to-be, as seen most spectacularly in Christopher Goscha’s recasting of the Vietnamese Revolution through an optic encompassing Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand, the southern Chinese provinces of Yunnan, Guangxi, and Guangdong, Hainan Island and the South China Sea.²³ At the same time, these struggles for national independence were also (nation-)state-making struggles themselves, as seen in the forcible enlistment of thousands of *Tái* coolie labourers and foot soldiers by the DRV’s People’s Army in the battle of *Điện Biên Phủ* in 1953.²⁴ The success of Indian nationalists in erasing and incorporating ‘princely states’ into a unified India noted elsewhere in this Special Issue has a near perfect parallel in President Soekarno’s forced dissolution of the Dutch-created Republic of the United States of Indonesia and deconstruction of its various constituent mini-states under local aristocracies in the immediate aftermath of Indonesia’s transition to independence in 1950. But as in the post-independence history of the Naga Hills chronicled elsewhere in this Special Issue, postcolonial Southeast Asia has hardly witnessed seamless success in the consolidation of modern territorial state sovereignty. Sensationalized ‘opium warlords’ have

²³ Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks*.

²⁴ Lentz, “Mobilizing a Frontier.”

endured as fixtures in the so-called ‘Golden Triangle’ along the borders of Burma/Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos, armed insurgencies associated with various ethno-nationalist aspirations have claimed effective control over large swathes of Burma/Myanmar over much of the country’s post-independence history, and since the early-mid 1970s a diverse set of armed groups have operated in the southern Philippines in loose condominium and recurring conflict with the – highly fragmented and factionalized – forces of the (national and local) government.²⁵

Overall, if one contemplates stateness and state sovereignty in Southeast Asia in the light of the arguments and examples about South Asia offered elsewhere in this Special Issue, the commonalities stand out rather than the contrasts. Clearly South Asia is not unique in terms of any inherent features of the Subcontinent which mark it as an exceptional region for state formation: there is abundant evidence of many parallels in Southeast Asia. Clearly what David Cannadine has termed the distinctive ‘ornamentalism’ of the British Empire²⁶ was not the sole cause for the patterns observed: Southeast Asian history, after all, features instances not only of British, but also Dutch, French, Spanish, and even American colonial rule. Clearly if Southeast Asia suggests anything about the revisionist reconsideration of South Asia offered in this Special Issue, it is the wider potential relevance of the arguments and examples provided herein for a more nuanced, differentiated, and critical understanding of stateness and state sovereignty elsewhere across the world.

²⁵ Smith, *Burma*; McKenna, *Muslim Rulers and Rebels*.

²⁶ Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*.

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