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[Review of: R. Robison (2012) Routledge handbook of Southeast Asian politics]

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DOI

[10.1163/22134379-17001014](https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-17001014)

Publication date

2014

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Rutten, R. (2014). [Review of: R. Robison (2012) Routledge handbook of Southeast Asian politics]. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 170(1), 148-152.
<https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-17001014>

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Richard Robison (ed.)

Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Politics. Abingdon, Oxon (U.K.) and New York: Routledge, 2012, vxiii + 378 pp. ISBN 9780415494274, price: GBP 140.00 (hardback); ISBN 9780415716512, price: 29.99 (paperback).

The *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Politics* offers challenging analyses of major issues in the political realm of Southeast Asia. It moves beyond official political institutions and deals with the raw power dynamics that determine the institutions' shape and content. Anyone who still believes that democratization, decentralization, 'good governance' policies, and economic liberalization in the Southeast Asian region deliver what policy makers say these should, will have a sobering experience reading this book. An excellent selection of authors, experts in the field, carefully dissect the dynamics of power in the competition over state and non-state resources, and the resistance and accommodations involved. Primarily inspired by critical political economy and sociology, the authors cover almost all countries in the region, account for key differences by means of enlightening comparisons, and show how current configurations of power are shaped by past (colonial and post-independence) trajectories. All twenty-two contributions are concise, engaging, and written in a clear and accessible style.

Three questions dominate debates on Southeast Asian politics, says Robison, and these inform the volume as well: (1) 'Why have democracies often been so fragile and authoritarian regimes so resilient?' (2) 'How does market capitalism influence the institutions of politics and governance and the configurations of power?' and (3) 'Does political and administrative decentralization and democratic reform open the door to a progressive and self-reliant civil society as a major player in the politics of the region?' (p. 2). In a skillful review of the literature, Robison (Ch. 1) shows how the answers to these questions radically differ by ideological and theoretical perspective—primarily, modernization theory, critical political economy and new institutional economics (rooted in rational choice theory). The authors of this volume (thirteen based in Australia, the other thirteen in Asia and Western countries) present their critical analyses in discussion with persistent 'misconceptions' of modernization and institutional theories.

With substantial local experience and historical knowledge of the region, the authors offer a 'dynamic account of politics' (p. 139), a 'proper contextualising' of political change (p. 136), and insight into the changing 'constellation of interests and power' that define the actual functioning of governance structures (p. 72). They examine change 'in terms of the workings of institutions and the way these are shaped and influenced by embedded power relation-

ships' (p. 242). Countering the rational-choice perspective that feeds on quantitative data detached from the context of power configurations, the authors offer qualitative analyses peopled, all the same, by rational actors (politicians, bureaucrats, businessmen, workers, NGO activists, technocrats, entrepreneurs in violence, and the like) who strategically pursue their interests within specific structures and processes.

The text is divided in six sections. Section 1, 'The Changing Landscape of Power,' discusses the rise and fall of leftwing opposition (Hewison and Rodan), the relative weakness of organized labour (Hutchison), and the rise of new oligarchies and their engagement with the state (Winters). Section 2, 'States and Regimes,' explains how democratization promoted 'money politics' in Indonesia (Hadiz); why populist politics became salient in Thailand in the 1990s (Phongpaichit and Baker); and how patronage-based parties in the Philippines continue to produce a 'democratic deficit' (Hutchcroft and Rocamora). It further probes why a 'liberal democratic regime transition' has been absent in Singapore despite its advanced economic development (Rodan); and why in Vietnam, despite the emergence of 'new' political forces (business elites, middle classes, new opposition groups) 'most people are content to operate within the one-party context' (Gainsborough, p. 135).

Section 3, 'Markets and Governance,' explores the interplay between global capitalism and local governance structures, and explains diverse outcomes. Why—so far—only a few Southeast Asian countries produced developmental states and developed economies is analyzed through a political-institutional lens, with a focus on the 'pressures and opportunities' faced by national political elites (Doner, p. 151). The section further discusses how pressures by the World Bank and other donors to promote neo-liberal policies and institutional reform are partly countered and 'hijacked' by members of local oligarchies (Rosser); how the ability of (constitutional) courts to influence economic policy depends on local power constellations (Gillespie); and how the appearance of the region's mega cities reflects their position in global capitalism (Chua Beng Huat).

By this point, the authors have convincingly critiqued modernization and institutional theories that assume Western-style democracy will logically follow capitalist development and democratic institutions. As Hadiz (Ch. 5) argues for Indonesia: the post-New Order era 'is clearly not about successful transition' to democracy; it is 'about how predatory interests' (a new oligarchy of political-business families and business cronies developed under Suharto) 'have been able to adroitly maintain and even further their ascendance through the institutions of democracy and through the mechanisms of money politics' (p. 80). The case of Singapore (Rodan, Ch. 8) illustrates why authori-

tarian regimes 'proved durable in precisely the most economically advanced countries' (p. 120). Capitalist development (controlled by the state, in particular by a powerful class of technocrats) did produce 'new social interests that require a political accommodation,' but the Singaporean state responded by channelling citizen participation into state-controlled 'consultative' institutions, producing a 'consultative authoritarian regime' (pp. 121, 131). A telling example is a state institution that solicits feedback on state policies from Singaporeans, called REACH, Reaching Everyone for Active Citizenry @ Home (p. 124).

Despite democratization and decentralization in part of the region, says Robison, 'it appears that vigorous social movements have made few inroads into the power of oligarchies and large political parties often backed by the state or by big business' (p. 4). Section 4, 'Civil Society and Participation,' explains why this is so, by means of well-contextualized analyses of Malaysia and Indonesia, in particular. The chapters explore the limits to the influence of social movements and political parties in the region (Aspinall and Weiss), the increasing power of regional elites rather than civil society in Indonesia (Schulte-Nordholt), and the politics of Indonesian agrarian and forest reform (McCarthy and Moeliono). Schulte-Nordholt (Ch. 15), for instance, discusses a range of unintended consequences of decentralization and electoral democracy in Indonesia (unintended, that is, by the 'unlikely alliance' of NGO activists, World Bank, and other agencies which had supported the changes in governance): more state and army at the regional level, more violent (regional) identity politics, more and stronger 'local administrative-cum-business elites' capturing the local state apparatus through electoral politics, and an expansion of 'patronage democracy' that 'excludes, by its very nature, solidarity among clients in terms of class' (p. 240). All of this severely limits, in Indonesia, the space for a strong, relatively autonomous civil society to develop.

Section 5, 'Violence and State Authority,' compares the post-conflict reconstruction of state authority in Cambodia and East Timor, critiquing liberal institutionalist models in the process (Hughes). The section also delves deeper into the role of organized gangs, militias, vigilantes and violent entrepreneurs in defining 'the nature and limits of state power' in Southeast Asia (Wilson, p. 288). These latter forms of privatized violence are 'undermining state power and legitimacy,' argues Wilson, but contribute at the same time to the consolidation of power of 'predatory political elites' (p. 289).

The global context is the primary focus of Section 6, 'Forging Regional and Global Accommodations.' Here, the politics of labour migration (Ford) and foreign trade policy (Nesadurai), the states' perceptions of American power (Hamilton-Hart) and state policies regarding regional security (Jones) are ana-

lyzed through a 'bottom-up' approach, 'showing how specific policies are shaped by the particular constellations of power and interests that underpin states' (p. 346).

As a whole, this collection offers a most rewarding read because of the wide range of relevant issues and countries covered, the incisive analyses of the individual contributions (many of which discuss causal mechanisms and offer valuable frameworks for wider application), the puzzles in Southeast Asian politics which the book brings forward and then helps to solve, and the value of the authors' critical, realist perspective grounded in expert regional knowledge. For this reviewer, the most insightful contributions are those that discuss contrasting cases and explain the differences. For example, when Winters (Ch. 4) explains 'how places like Indonesia and the Philippines can be democratic and yet have no rule of law applying to oligarchs, while cases like Singapore can be non-democratic and yet the rule of law over and for oligarchs is undeniable' (p. 64), he offers an analysis of the 'politics of wealth defense' which forms an excellent framework for further comparative analysis.

Perhaps the volume overemphasizes the power of business-cum-political elites (enhanced by state structures that accommodate their interests) as a key causal variable in explaining political trajectories. Cases of successful advocacy with far-reaching structural effects, by and on behalf of underprivileged populations, remain somewhat underexposed and unexplained, such as, in the Philippines, the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program with its piecemeal but steadfast implementation, and the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act. Moreover, the voice of institutionalists in the volume might have been louder to better appreciate their dissenting views. In a footnote, Hutchcroft and Rocamora state: '[...] we do not believe that institutional structures are merely derivative of larger socio-economic structures; they have a causal power of their own, able to influence and shape broader socio-economic realities in important ways' (p. 115). They make an interesting argument for institutional reform in the Philippines to help remedy the 'democratic deficit' in the country, specifically through the 'cultivation of stronger and more programmatic political parties' and some measure of proportional representation. Unfortunately, their argument falls short of explaining how to 'insulate' these institutions 'from particularistic demands (especially from the dominant oligarchy)' (p. 115).

Despite the breadth of the collection, readers may miss some issues and actors, which may be unavoidable given the scope of the Handbook project. The perceived gaps may well differ from reader to reader. This reviewer, for example, finds that the volume's focus on state actors, organized citizens (labour unions, NGOs) and political-economic elites—in other words, the standard actors in political science—neglects the political agency of non-orga-

nized, non-powerful actors, except as clients of political patrons. A more explicit engagement with the work of James Scott and Ben Kerkvliet on this issue, in particular their work on Southeast Asia, would have broadened the scope to include the unorganized rural and urban poor (after all, a large part of the region's population) as political agents in their own right. More attention to actors beyond the national and district capitals could have shed more light on the political role of farmers and landless workers and the significance of village-level politics and rural power constellations (see, for example, Andrew Walker, *Thailand's Political Peasants*, 2012). Religion and ethnicity are discussed in several country-specific chapters as grounds for popular mobilization, but a comparative discussion of, say, the rise of Islamist movements or indigenous people's organizations across the region would have formed a welcome addition. Moreover, the nation-state is the unquestioned unit of analysis, comparison, and context (with valuable explorations at sub-national levels) but this choice is not self-evident and needs some explanation. Finally, more brief illustrations of people and events to put flesh on the analyses' bones would have further increased the book's appeal to students. The points above, however, do not detract from the exceptional importance and value of this collection.

In short, the *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Politics* is highly recommended for scholars and students of the region, political scientists at large, policy makers and NGO activists, and in particular the policy experts of international donor agencies branded 'naive' by quite a few authors of this collection.

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