

On: 11 June 2015, At: 02:34

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954

Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Democratization

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fdem20>

Conjunctures and continuities in Southeast Asian Politics, edited by Narayanan Ganesan

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Published online: 11 Jun 2015.



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To cite this article: Marjolein Deros (2015): Conjunctures and continuities in Southeast Asian Politics, edited by Narayanan Ganesan, Democratization, DOI: [10.1080/13510347.2015.1031746](https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2015.1031746)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2015.1031746>

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BOOK REVIEW

Conjunctures and continuities in Southeast Asian Politics, edited by Narayanan Ganesan, Singapore, ISEAS Publishing, 2013, 240 pp., index, \$39.90 (paperback), ISBN 978-981-4379-946

This book analyses the recent history of Southeast Asian countries using tools provided by historical institutionalism. The editor, Ganesan, works with the central concept of “conjuncture”: a specific momentum in a political context where a set of circumstances provides a window of opportunity for change. Such a conjuncture is broader than a critical juncture, a term many are more familiar with. The editor does not elaborate on the difference between the two but the analysis of conjunctures goes beyond one critical event. It also takes in the alternative “paths” that could have been followed and pictures the background more comprehensively.

The seven empirical chapters use conjunctures to structure their story. They each identify the setting in which the “time” was right for a certain decision to be taken or for a change to occur. Crucially, the overall objective is to focus on the question whether changes in the political setting were triggered by internal events or external pressure. The countries discussed are the Philippines, Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia. Professor Ganesan has brought together country experts to apply his framework. In essence, all chapters touch upon crucial questions concerning democracy and democratization. They explain the path dependency of decisions leading to democratic transition in some cases and the complete collapse of democratic principles in others. The chapters, for me, mainly describe the relevant facts, but the editor’s framework is successful in streamlining them into a historical institutionalist analysis.

The country case studies provide an analysis of some of the major events in the recent history of Southeast Asia. The focus on the conjunctures is without a doubt of added value and the argument of path dependency is strengthened as several chapters also take in the contemporary political context. The chapter on Vietnam (by Dr Ta Minh Tuan) for example provides a comprehensive analysis of the conjuncture of the 1986 reforms (*doi moi*). These reforms had already been generally identified as a turning point for Vietnam but the author puts the events before and after the 1986 reforms at the centre of the analysis. It combines the set-up of particular circumstances leading up to the reform decision with its lasting consequences. The 1988 uprising in Myanmar is another example of an “established” conjuncture that is being put into perspective by presenting a full timeline of the events and their remaining impact. It addresses both the changes and continuities

in the 1988 upheaval aftermath. Dr Tin Maung Maung Than rightfully acknowledges the potential of the recent reforms in Myanmar in this chapter's final endnote.

However, some of the chapters have difficulty balancing depth and width. The chapter on Cambodia (by Dr Ramses Amer) identifies and processes four different conjunctures. The first three conjunctures could, in my opinion, be grouped as episodes of a broader conjuncture of uncertain times with the overthrow of the prince, the fall of Phnom Penh and the Vietnamese intervention occurring within one decade. Such bundling is assessed as problematic in the concluding remarks by Ganesan, but it is not clear why. The analysis here consequently lacks sufficient depth and remains superficial. The chapter on the 2008 elections in Malaysia, on the other hand, offers an in-depth empirical analysis, yet, for me, the broader political implications are not fully addressed. Dr Johan Saravanamuttu identifies several continuities in Malaysian politics, but the how and why of these are not discussed. This is of crucial relevance due to the particular state of Malaysia's democracy. Overall, this book is rich on details on the recent history of Southeast Asia, although I feel most of the chapters do need some prior knowledge from the reader on the political and historical context. For the reader to understand terms such as EDSA People Power, *doi moi* and *reformasi* are taken for granted.

All of the chapters (are made to) fit the conjuncture framework, yet also show some of the limits of historical institutionalism in general. The introduction explicitly speaks of how factors and forces come together in a way not foreseen or anticipated. The analyses are thus mainly focused on rather abstract structural factors and political actors appear to have very limited room to change an outcome. This is something Professor Ganesan acknowledges in the concluding remarks, yet agency factors (as in, more individual decision-making) are seen as something else to look at in further research, while I would rather argue to fully take these into account in the analysis of the conjuncture.

When looking for a detailed and structured overview of some of the essential elements in the recent political history of Southeast Asia, this book should well be on your list. Moreover, the historical institutionalist framework does provide useful tools for analysis, also beyond the realm of Southeast Asia area studies. Finally, with respect to democracy and democratization, this book gives crucial insights to understand the current state of democracy in the region. It touches upon both internal and external factors determining how democracy succeeds or fails.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2015.1031746>