Introduction
*Performing the State**

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Abstract

Seeking to expand the domain of the political beyond normative understandings of the state, the articles in this special edition examine the performative aspects of governance and state-making in Southeast Asia. Combining historical and contemporary case studies, this collection brings together four examples of performative statecraft from Burma/Myanmar, Thailand, and Indonesia. The collection coheres around the analytical optic of performance, with particular emphasis on the performative repertoires developed by religious militas and non-state security groups. This analytical optic allows the contributors to gauge how such non-state groups conceive and engage with the state and its institutions, and to provide fresh insights on the performative aspects of state-making processes.

Keywords

Analyses of political affairs often take a top-down perspective of statecraft, rather than studying the performative and practical interactions between state and society. Seeking to expand the domain of the political beyond normative understandings of the state, this special issue examines the performative aspects of governance and state-making in Southeast Asia. The notion of statecraft illuminated in this special edition uses religious militias and local mechanisms for security and identity formation in order to reflect upon larger governance issues. Combining historical and contemporary case studies, this collection brings together four examples of performative statecraft from Burma/Myanmar, Thailand, and Indonesia. The collection coheres around the analytical optic of performance with particular emphasis on the performative repertoires developed by religious militias and non-state security groups. This analytical optic enables us to gauge how such non-state groups conceive and engage with the state and its institutions, and to address the performative aspects of state-making processes. The use of non-state militias/community security groups is a means of providing local political identity and is important in creating perceptions of personal security in local communities.

State-making processes are often ambiguous because a variety of institutions compete to exercise authority and use the props and 'paraphernalia of modern statehood' (Lund 2008:5). Although the exercise of power and authority alludes to the idea of the state (Abrams 1988), 'the language of the state', as Christian Lund observes, 'is not the preserve of government institutions alone; other institutions strut in borrowed plumes' (Lund 2008:5). As this collection suggests, it is precisely through rituals, performance, and the appropriation of different 'languages of stateness' (Hansen and Stepputat 2001:7) that such groups may become state-like. These local community groups and religious militias, which we are categorizing as non-state actors, often cannot be separated from the institutions of state authority. State and non-state actors and institutions are therefore intricately interconnected, in a continual entanglement and dialogue that is pivotal to post-colonial statecraft in Southeast Asia. This special edition illuminates how state activity is overlaid with social understandings. States are a consequence of the society upon which they are built and sometimes even vigorous state repression cannot eliminate a society's memory and beliefs (Scott 1998).

Performance as a matter of statecraft cannot be overlooked. It has extremely real consequences. For instance, under the shroud of darkness in the early hours of 29 April 2015 shots were fired on Nusakambangan island, Indonesia. Eight convicted drug dealers were executed swiftly and under highly symbolic circumstance. These shots were the performance of ultimate power—the ability to 'lawfully' take life. Indonesia's President Joko Widodo's constant refrain in the lead up to these executions did not seem to be primarily about morality or legality *per se*. Rather, his common refrain was that those opposing these executions should 'respect our [Indonesia's] sovereignty'. A complex cosmology of power and authority in Indonesia was being performed in the most tragic manner.

One's assessment of state governance is inevitably based on assumptions. These expectations are often informed by the notion of the Westphalian state that is built on 'Western' nation-states, particularly in Europe and North America (Chatterjee 2011). Michel Foucault pointed to the notion of states monopolizing the means and use of force (read: violence) in their sovereign territory (Foucault 1997). Yet in Southeast Asia, as in most postcolonial states, violence has rarely, if ever, been the legitimate monopoly of the state (Anderson 2001; Hansen and Stepputat 2001). What if governance models were to take a more fluid form and have less totalizing state power? Seeking to 'denaturalize' the state, this special issue takes an ethnographically informed look at the forms and meanings of governance in Southeast Asia. Although states may portray themselves as stable, unified, and immensely powerful, in reality they are embedded in their societies in historically distinct ways.[1] Governance in much of Southeast Asia involves an intermeshing of state and non-state actors and institutions in constant negotiation, secret complicity, and/or open cooperation.

The approach adopted here means that governance is often best conceptualized as a socially intricate and organic activity. It also implies that the exercise of sovereign power, whether by the state, a religious militia, or a criminal gang, is a tentative and unstable project—hence the notion of 'performing' takes centre stage. An essential part of this collection is to review whether such groups are, in fact, alternatives to formal state authority, or rather, if they are in effect in some form of collusion with the state. This collection considers these issues from both historical and contemporary perspectives, exploring the porous and shifting boundaries between formal and informal sovereignties. The groups

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1   Aretxaga 2003; Colombijn and Lindblad 2002; Day 2002; Van Klinken and Barker 2009; Sidel 1999.

portrayed here are frequently part of local power structures with leaders that are able to exert significant socio-political authority. This identifies a form of hybrid sovereignty that blends state and non-state leaders and institutions into frameworks of local governance (Jaffe 2013).

This special edition considers how militias and other forms of local, non-state security arrangements across Southeast Asia typically emerge in response to these alternative governance models. Our ambition is to identify some of these evolving formulas of authority, giving due attention to the historical and cultural repertoires informing the activities of these militias and non-state security groups. Across Southeast Asia, it is not unusual for religious, local, and civil-society groups to implement their own law enforcement and security arrangements in local communities.[2] Given that states seldom encompass the entire field of justice and security provision, it is important to examine the internal dynamics of non-state security groups and how they assert authority, establish order, and resolve conflicts (see Bakker and Timmer 2014). It is within this complex law enforcement environment across the Southeast Asian region, within which the state and non-state groups interact, that the dynamics of governance become transparent.

Through focusing on militias that are affiliated with local community, civil society, or religious groups, we seek to ascertain what these tell us about state performance and local governance. The notion of performance embodies the idea of state activity as theatre (Geertz 1980). This approach implies that state operation does not merely reflect function, but also the ability to project authority through symbolism. In his study of the nineteenth-century Balinese state, the *negara*, Geertz argued that rituals and spectacle constituted the core of the polity that was based on the 'idea that by providing a model [...] a faultless image of civilized existence, the court shapes the world around it' (Geertz 1980:13). While this model has been criticized for misrepresenting the violent nature of the Balinese state (see Schulte Nordholt 1981; Day 2002), the study should remind us of the broad repertoire of semiotic practices through which states—precolonial, modern, or aspiring—are imagined and performed.

Geertz's perspective has opened up new avenues for understanding statecraft and governance in Southeast Asia and beyond. These ideas developed while examining Indonesian governance, which is a complex amalgam of function and performance. As Geertz (1980:128) suggests: 'We are faced once again

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2 Barker 2007; Herriman 2012; Jensen and Hapal 2015; Jonsson 2009; Kingsley 2012; McCargo 2013; Myrttinen 2013; Telle 2011, 2013, and 2015; Wilson 2008, 2011, and 2015.

with a society stretched taut between cultural paradigms conceived of as descending from above and practical arrangements conceived of as rising from below.' A tangible way of examining these notions and interpretations of governance is to examine how members of militias express their identity and rationale for participation in these groups. Important to this issue of identity formation is the question: How does religious symbolism operate as a motivator within socio-political affairs? Further to this, how do religious beliefs legitimate people's activities and justify their behaviour? In order to unpick these issues, the following four articles will provide a depth and breadth of perspective. They ground the analysis from the bottom up.

Joshua Barker's contribution illuminates how the individual can create sources of personalized power and authority. It provides an avenue by which to investigate socio-political ordering in Southeast Asia. The individual's relationship with their followers and organizations provides us with insights into social processes and modes of activity. An example he provides is the way in which militias have been identified as potent organizations within which to study socio-political leaders in the Southeast Asian context. The leadership of these organizations often provide a clear articulation of the notion of 'figures of prowess'. Barker argues that Southeast Asian militias provide an example of a broader category of phenomena called 'informal sovereignties', where local power and authority is vested in local communities and embodied in these leadership figures. Therefore Barker's article builds upon the theoretical foundations of this Introduction and provides further groundwork for the contributions to follow.

The next contribution in this special edition, by Niklas Foxeus, deals with the interface between state and religious non-state organizations in recent Burmese history. The esoteric Buddhist organization examined by Foxeus performs ritual violence in a 'war' to defend Buddhism and the nation-state. Although the Burmese military junta has been adamantly secular, the reality is far more complex. The relationship between the junta and Buddhist groups such as *ariyā-weizzā* is continuously evolving. Foxeus's contribution notes that at times these groups were clamped down upon as they were perceived to challenge state authority. At other times, the members of the junta relied upon them for support and guidance. This precarious position for Buddhist groups has much to do with the cosmologies of power that draw state officials towards them and reinforce the importance of such groups. However, at the same time, the junta has to continually reinforce its political legitimacy and supremacy, therefore leading it to repress these groups. This is a complex and culturally contingent process that keeps the relationship between state and non-state actors fraught, fluid, and highly contested.

Politics in Thailand can be a tough and dangerous business. Even more than this, as Tyrell Haberkorn's article highlights, it is a highly symbolic activity. One performs one's statecraft and politics through the colour of one's clothes. A yellow T-shirt is an obvious identifier of one's political inclinations and interpretation, and support for core state actors and institutions such as the monarchy. The colour provides a visual marker in a violent political contest. In the case of yellow shirts the monarchy is perceived to be at the very heart of the Thai state. People involved with Thai politics have verbalized and written about their feelings on all manner of virtual and real platforms, but the act of colouring one's identity provides an optical effect. It allows for the performance of grassroots politics. Haberkorn examines how the unfolding crisis over the monarchy's place within the polity has unleashed a violent hyper-royalist parapolitics that blurs the lines between the extrajudicial and the legal, and the state and the para-state, as various groups have mobilized in the defence of the monarchy. The colours that are given life in Haberkorn's article are not simply the optics of protest, but a means for demarcating real and painfully contested political battle lines.

Laurens Bakker's article shows how violence is carried out in contemporary Indonesia through groups such as the Betawi Brotherhood Forum in Jakarta and Brigade Manguni in Manado. These groups create hyper-masculinized performances and identify a blurring of state and non-state political imaginations. According to Bakker, *ormas* groups can be described as 'twilight institutions' (Lund 2006)—fluid institutions operating between state and society, public and private. Technically, these are non-state entities, although their uniforms and martial organization mimic the state and are backed by political elites. Politicians use these groups because they are often effective means of political mobilization, and, when necessary, a potential tool to be deployed in order to forcefully exhibit their power. At the same time, Bakker insists that potentially violent *ormas* groups like the Betawi Brotherhood Forum and Brigade Manguni tend to portray themselves as protectors of 'local' imagined communities, thus simultaneously posing an alternative to state norms of citizenship.

Political life is not just about symbolism and performance of political, religious, or ethnic identity. Local leaders, religious organizations, and militias provide a means for interpreting the interface between the state and non-state actors. This orientation to the interpretation of political arrangements from the local upwards allows for a nuanced understanding of statecraft. The actors and institutions considered in this special edition show how a negotiated and fluid series of relationships provides us with realistic interpretations of vibrant governance structures. The performance of political culture, therefore, gives us a

means of understanding statecraft in Southeast Asia. It allows us to carefully consider the priorities and values that guide governance arrangements and points of contestation across this region.

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