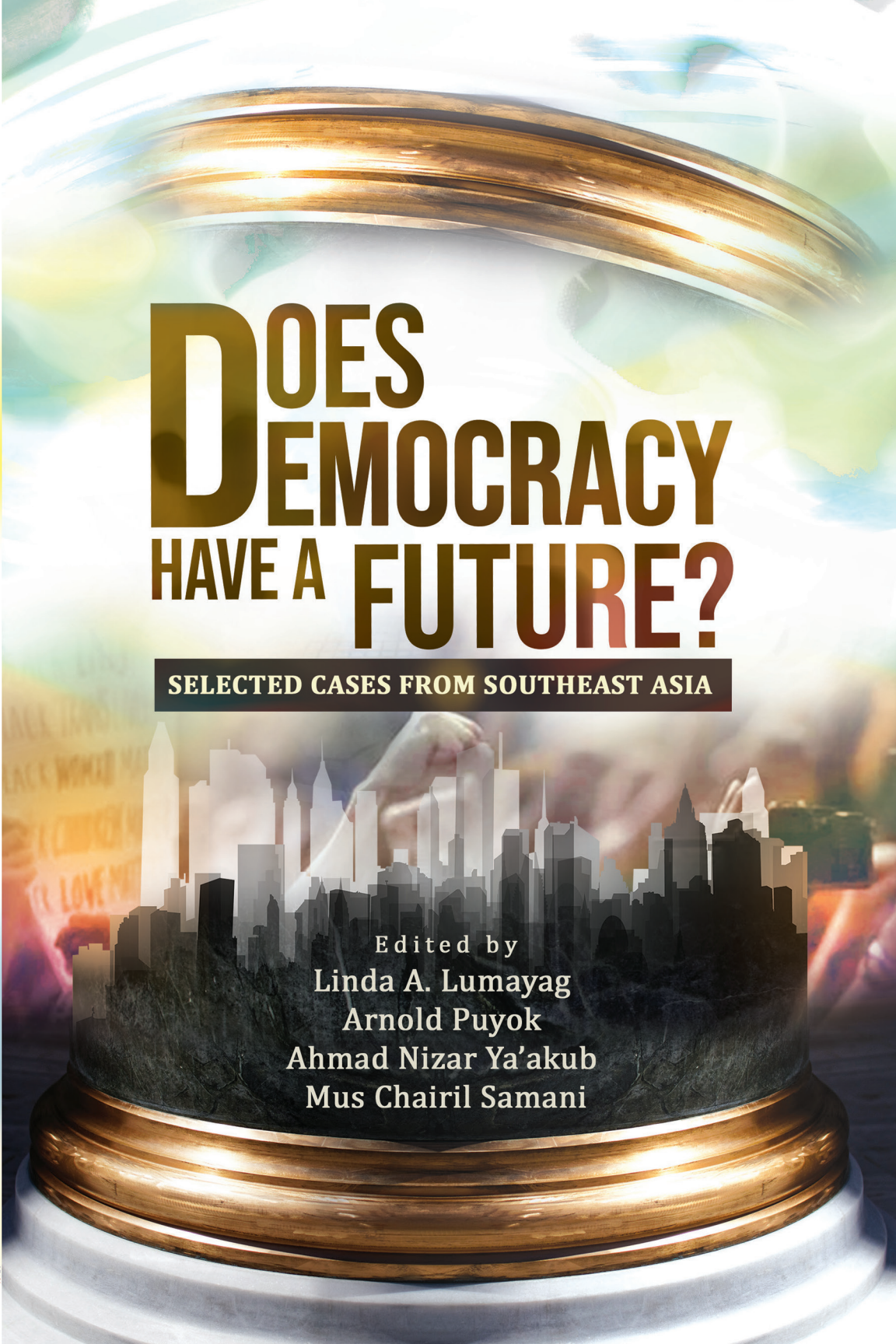
DOES DEMOCRACY HAVE A FUTURE?
SELECTED CASES FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA
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UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK

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# Preface

The book is a compilation of selected papers presented at the Third International Conference on Elections and Democracy (E & D) on April 19-20, 2017, in Kuching, Sarawak which carried the theme "Does Democracy Have a Future?" This meeting of academics, policy makers, and political thinkers in Southeast Asia is one of the flagship conferences under the auspices of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS).

Given the dichotomy between the "ideal" and "reality" of democracy and the debates surrounding the practice of democracy across the world, the then Department of Politics and International Relations hosted the E & D hoping that academics, politicians, political parties, bureaucrats, researchers, the media and general public would be able to deepen their understanding of democracy and to debate on the future of democracy.

The aims of the conference were as follows: (1) to provide a platform for academics, analysts, politicians, media practitioners, students and the public to discuss pertinent issues in elections, democracy and good governance, (2) to provide opportunity for scholars to collaborate in research and publication, (3) to promote the culture of

scholarly and intellectual engagement among the faculty's academic members and scholars from various institutions, (4) to produce academic monographs and other publications focusing on electoral issues and democracy, and (5) to put UNIMAS on the map as a national institution for research and dissemination of knowledge on elections, democracy and good governance.

The seven papers selected in this book merit a closer look. They were written by academics and political observers based in Indonesia, Philippines and Malaysia. This conference was made possible through the support of UNIMAS, Sarawak Convention Bureau, Better Nation Institute and Society Empowerment and Economic Development of Sabah (SEEDS).

To close, the editors would like to extend their appreciation to all contributors who painstakingly waited long for their papers to be produced in this form. It is no joke to be waiting for five years just so this book will come to fruition. Terima Kasih.

The Editors

# Introduction

This book is a collective effort of several academic authors to produce a material that interrogates the idea and practice of democracy in Southeast Asia.

Looking back, the idea of democracy can be traced to the ancient Greek civilisation. It has gained popularity across the globe as shown by the increase in the number of "free" countries in the Freedom House Annual Survey. In 1986, the number of "free" and "partly free" countries stood at 34% compared to "not free" (32%). The number of free countries jumped to 41% and 47% in 1996 and 2006, respectively. The "free", "partly free" and "not free" status given by Freedom House to countries in its annual survey is based on their political rights and civil liberties scores.

Democracy can be generally summarised as follows: a meaningful and extensive competition among individuals and organised groups for all effective positions of government power; a highly inclusive level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies, at least through regular free and fair elections; and a high level of civil and political liberties: freedom of expression, freedom of press, and freedom to form and join organisations.

Practically, most countries in the world today claim to be "democratic", considering they "support" formal electoral institutions and processes. Some countries even attempt to portray themselves as democratic even though they limit popular participation and install anti-democratic laws and policies. Democracy has gained currency as reflected by the people's wishes the world over to participate more actively in governance and to voice their views on issues that matter to them. People yearn to speak openly, give comments on public affairs, and criticise their government. However, how far have thinkers, practitioners, and even supporters of democracy succeeded in promoting and putting into practice democratic principles? Has democracy thrived or declined? Despite the attempts by governments in the west to promote and institutionalise democracy, some governments in Asia and in the African continent, for instance, regard democracy as exclusively "western concept". Some also argue that the western-led democracy is incompatible with the cultures of "non-western" people.

Democracy is also facing with teething challenges of the 21st century. The rise of China has tilted the balance of power in the Asia Pacific and has posed a significant challenge to democratisation in the region. In Russia, the continuing crackdown on civil society and independent media is a direct challenge to democratic principles. In the Middle East, the rise of radical Islam has posed a threat to democracy. In Africa and Latin America, problems of corruption and violence continue to fester to an unimaginable degree. Or in the United States of America under the leadership of President Donald Trump where the once progressive ideas have subverted back to conservatism amidst the promotion of neoliberal economic values embellished in Trump's range of policies.

In Southeast Asia, the military junta in Thailand, which seized power in 2014, introduced a series of Draconian laws to silent critics and to maintain its grip on power. In the Philippines, the hugely popular president Rodrigo Duterte ignored the calls of international community and local activists to stop his policy of extrajudicial killings

of suspected drug dealers and addicts. The assault on democracy continued in Malaysia through the crackdowns on demonstrators and critics reacting to the alleged misuse of public funds by public officials.

Do the events above signal democracy's gradual decline in Southeast Asia and the rise of populism and authoritarianism in the region?

To follow through this nagging question on whether democracy as *idea/ideal* and *practice/reality* is indeed a defining centerstage in our everyday life in this part of the world. We reckon that democracy is a contested concept embedded in a particular socio, political, economic and historical specificities of each nation-state. We are of the view that Southeast Asia, though organisationally seen as belonging to one collective bloc, in reality, nation-states within it behave differently. This political behavioural difference is anchored on varied structures and processes media control, ethnic relations, religion, ethnic minorities, governance and government, political financing to say the least. Southeast Asia is one of the most diverse groupings of societies and cultures in the global world that it would be sheer arrogance to view it otherwise. It is in this context that this book is situated.

The selected cases in this book describe a society in Southeast Asia confronting with a range of issues that shape, influence and impact the kind of society we envision to establish. This book carries out everyday experiences of how democracy is practised from the macro to the micro level of governance across state-inspired institutions. In a lot of ways, the different expositions of these everyday experiences may make or un-make people's quest for greater political voice, to become empowered citizens or it could just be heavily relying on the whims of the kind of political leadership people popularly support.

Gayathry S. Venkiteswaran investigates the media politics of Myanmar, Thailand, and Indonesia in Chapter One. Since the democratisation revolutions in the 1980s to 1990s, Southeast Asia has undergone enormous upheaval, including in Thailand and Indonesia.

Political changes affected the media, which had been under strict control and censorship. At the same time, media were central to the political changes in those countries. In recent years, a shift towards political openness began in Myanmar after decades of military rule. While the changes in Myanmar are at a nascent stage, Thailand and Indonesia have seen remarkable developments in the area of media development and freedoms. Yet all three countries are struggling in different ways, among them the commercialisation of media and political divisions in society, resulting in serious rollbacks on freedom of expression and press freedom. The paper analyses the goals of the reforms among the different stakeholders in Thailand, Indonesia and Myanmar through a comparative study to identify potential similarities and differences in how different societies respond to, and shape media reforms.

In Chapter Two, Linda A. Lumayag, Ivie C. Esteban and Francisco P. Dumanig examine the meteoric rise to power of President Rodrigo Duterte by defying conventions in the most highly-charged Philippine presidential elections ever in May 2016. This chapter explores the role of online media in shaping Duterte's political persona and the perceived impact on the type of government Duterte wants to pursue. How do social media shape the Duterte leadership in terms of users' reactions and feedback through postings and comments? This paper departs from the traditional notion of ethnographic study of immersing in the community by attempting to utilise virtual ethnography as a method of data collection. Analysis is based on texts from three online mainstream newspapers published during the first 100 days of Duterte's assumption of power and two online social media sites accessed by various users. The unfettered control of the social media and the unprecedented participation of the masses may help to understand the populist strategy of Duterte in his attempt to gain the support of the people. At the time this paper was written, it was argued that media political influence may no longer be controlled by the state apparatus. Mass access to social media and other forms of media channels could change the landscape of political control in the Philippines.

Chapter Three, by Fang Yi Xue, Sarjit S. Gill and Ahmad Tarmizi Talib, presents some contemporary issues affecting three main ethnic minority communities in Malacca, namely the Baba Nyonya, Portuguese, and Chitty. This chapter also anticipates their political support towards the ruling government in Malacca. These ethnic minority communities have been consistently marginalised in various development phase specifically socio-economic and political development which has raised some concerns in Malaysia. Many of the unresolved issues arising infer to influence their political support in the 14th General Election. Despite their small numbers, these ethnic minority communities play a significant role in some electoral areas where they are densely populated. In such area, they are the "king maker" when there is a narrow contest between two competing parties.

In Chapter Four, Ahmad Nizar Yaakub begins by recalling the influence of constructivist theories of Alexander Wendt and Stephen Walt that religion is an ideational construct which is often left out from the discussions by leading theories as a factor in explaining developments in politics and international relations. The author stresses that religion has a role to play in a state domestic politics and that sometimes extends influence in foreign policy and how a state reacts to the global issues. Indonesia which has the largest Muslim population in the world cannot avoid the factor of religion in discussing its domestic politics, foreign policy and its reaction to the plight of the Muslim world and other global affairs. This paper argued that Islam did not feature prominently during Sukarno's presidency and as well as in the first two decades of the Suharto's New Order. However, Islam began to emerge as a growing force to a varying degree on the Indonesian political scene and somewhat influenced its foreign policy in the last decade of the Suharto's New Order regime and the Reformasi (Reformation) era. The concern on Islamic identity among Indonesians, an increasing number of formal and informal Islamic political parties, the elevation of Islamic leaders like Abdurrahman Wahid as President and later Hamzah Haz as Vice President and the introduction of a Syariah law in Aceh showed

the growing importance of Islam in Indonesian politics. Subsequent Indonesian leaders later on consolidate their political powers by attracting support from the formal and informal Islamic parties. At the same time, Indonesia's involvement in D8 and Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC), its concern on Bosnia, Palestine and the fight against domestic and global terrorism to some extent showed that Islam began to frame the issues and approaches in Indonesia's foreign policy.

Yasmin Abdurahim-Tagorda, in Chapter Five, describes a local situation in Mindanao where the practice of democracy remains a product of perception and attitude. This study determines the status of citizen involvement in barangay governance of Amai Manabilang, Lanao del Sur, a municipality inhabited by settlers of different origins. Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches, the survey illustrates that knowledge and awareness of the respondents on the nature of barangay and the provision on citizen participation and their perception and attitude were deemed significant in decision of respondents to participate or not. The degree of participation of the citizens in various avenues, except for purok meetings is between moderate and low. Moreover, barangay assemblies, meetings, consultations, discussions between the officials and the respondents are done infrequently, thus providing no opportunity for the residents to voice their demands. In the scheme of things, the kind of participation is merely supportive, not active decision-making, the symbol of a truly meaningful participatory democracy.

Chapter Six by Mada Sukmajati assesses the patterns of financing politics in democratising Indonesia at both the national and local level. In doing so, it explores practices of money politics in three areas, namely political parties, elections, and parliaments. Money politics in political parties works in selecting leaders and candidates for the legislative and executive branches. This paper shows that party financing in Indonesia is based on the elite party model. Money politics in elections has to do with candidates' efforts to mobilise voters. Vote buying is the most popular electoral strategy in

legislative elections as well as in direct regional elections. Meanwhile, money politics in parliament refers to the behaviour of members of parliament and of governors, mayors, and regents when they try to gain access to state resources, and the consequences of their behaviour. Mada Sukmajati argues that money politics in these three areas is interrelated. Money politics in one area generates money politics in other areas. Consequently, the way politicians manage their political financing has influenced democracy in post-Suharto Indonesia.

The last chapter (Chapter Seven) by Joy Aceron examines the role of political financing in the Philippines by arguing that accountability and transparency must be central in the discussion on the financing of political activities at all levels in electoral politics. Joy Aceron further teases out the ethical question of civil society movements that receive funding from the State and whether they would still be able to carry the ideals of independence in their thinking and judgment.

In summary, all seven papers examine various issues ranging from media reform, use of popular media to promote popular politics, Islam and its role in domestic politics, foreign policy, money politics and political financing, to participation in local politics, demonstrating the peculiarity in the practice of democracy by each of the Southeast Asian nation-state examined in this book.

Chapter
Eight

# Conclusion

*Linda A. Lumayag and Arnold Puyok*

This book has set forth an idea that democracy is contentious across different countries as highlighted in this material. From the beginning, we posed a question of whether democracy matters, or whether democracy has a future. We stressed that democracy must not be seen as a 'one size fits all' idea especially when we consider Southeast Asia as our playing field. True enough, the countries we have included in this book speak of different democratic practices and realities attuned to the respective nation-states' earlier (and current) socio-political history.

From inception, up to the final preparation, and even before the printing of this book, we have noticed changing political landscapes in the region, where democratic processes assume different dimensions as political history continually takes shape.

We are at a juncture in our history where democracy, perceived as a dominant model for governance, engenders varying socio-political realities intersecting culture, mass media, religion, and technology, which are, interestingly, impacting different levels of people's interaction between the state and society. The seven papers

presented in this book have allowed us to imagine the extent of contemporary experiences such countries in Southeast Asia have put up themselves. Based on these contemporary experiences, a few points are considered for our reflection and moving forward. These points revolve around four main issues, namely, the media as political machinery and the policies surrounding it; unabated political dynastic tendencies; political financing; and political participation, as we continue to provide a wider breadth of the transformation of nation-states based on embracing these democratic principles.

The first is on the role of digital technology and digital social platforms as a political tool to bid for political power. Truly, we are seeing an increasing transformation in the way politics and politicians reach out to the electorate and the issues they convey. On a superficial level, we observed this shift in the mode of communication from the traditional mainstream of print, radio, and television to digital social media platforms that tremendously affect electoral practices.

While governing states in poorer countries may still have relied on traditional strategies to reach out to the masses, the interface of ICT has unsettled and contested an earlier reliance on mainstream print, radio, and television as a secondary strategy. It is not because social media has changed the 'rule of the game' that enables almost all stakeholders to shape the contours of both the political narratives versus the people's narrative, as they may wish. What is disconcerting is the 'invisible hand' that controls the digital platform itself. If we examine what has happened in this region, the finer details showed that social media is not manipulation-proof. It sets a perspective, an agenda prodded in by the politics of algorithms that affect people's attitudes and choices.

Having said that, we assumed that countries in the region have fair access to internet connectivity. Ironically, areas that remain unconnected to the digital platform would not have the privilege

to get educated on the political campaigns going on. This created another layer and therefore heightened social inequality based on access to information technology.

Another point is the policy on media control by the state explains the complexity of its impact on media reforms that both civil society and reform bodies in countries attempt to grapple with. Taking into account the vast expanse of influence of the media in people making an informed opinion about anything, it is ironic that the political state continues to stifle freedom of expression, hence, narrowing the democratic space.

Second, social media, on the one hand, has revolutionised the political communication strategy of both electorates and politicians and civil societies, until the 2016 national elections, at least, in the Philippines. Active engagement of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tiktok has changed how support (or rejection) can be easily manipulated through media digital disinformation. So then, social media has become a contested terrain. The fulcrum of the disinformation campaign however does not operate on its own as it belabours a deluge of black money into the system to sustain new activities of farm trolls and paid workers designed to sow confusion and chaos, thus, disadvantaging dissenting voices.

The intricate ingredients of social media, electronic fraud, and money politics produced interesting lethal weapons against democracy. Recent political developments in 2017 through 2022, the Philippine presidential election being the most recent, show the extent of destruction this has created in democratic states. Vote buying, for example, presents a new way by anchoring the electorate to existing remittance apps to send money purposely to influence voters' choices. There is no way one can ordinarily know and identify such acts as vote buying since it is difficult to monitor a digital exchange of monies from the electoral candidate to the voter.

Third, added to that is the political financing of political parties that up to now remains unclear and devoid of transparency and accountability. The unbridled use of money for political campaigns insinuates a strong adherence to an ill practice of money politics that further restricts the participation of the working class in electoral politics. This practice however does not operate in isolation; it is strongly embedded in the sustained rise of political dynasty especially, in Southeast Asia.

As we finally end this book, we note that five years have gone swiftly from the time we held the E&D Conference to publication. As well, Southeast Asia has just emerged from the unfriendly onslaught of COVID-19, and countries are still reeling from its impact, especially on the closure of international borders, where national economies are standing still, and where local and national governance are instantly focused on how to manage the global health crisis. Unfortunately, we could not make any inclusions related to COVID-19 although we surmise political discourse on governance, health crisis management, mobility/immobility and migration, environmental justice, and so on will be around for some time.

To the contributors, thank you so much for your patience and understanding.

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# DOES DEMOCRACY HAVE A FUTURE?

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