

## TRANSFORMATION AND CONFLICT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

### Introduction

Jos Platenkamp, Susanne Feske, Stephan Engelkamp

Each of the Southeast Asian states and the manifold societies of which they are composed are going through incisive processes of transformation. To analyse such complex processes and the conflicts which they may engender a Research Group was established in 2007 at the Graduate School of Politics of Muenster University, the members of which endeavour to study the processes in different states of Southeast Asia in various disciplinary perspectives. In the present volume students of political science, social anthropology and religious studies present their work in progress. Their contributions range from comprehensive reports on completed PhD or Masters Theses and other researches conducted at the Graduate School, to preliminary research notes.

What are now the nation-states of Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Timor Leste (former East Timor) and the Philippines were first identified as 'Southeast Asia' by the allied military command during the Second World War. It thus replaced names such as French *Indochine*, Dutch *Nederlandsch Oost-Indië*, English *Malay Archipelago* - each testifying of the prevailing colonial claims on different parts of the Southeast Asian region - by an exclusively geographical denomination. Yet this common identifier masks a staggering linguistic and socio-cultural complexity. The societies in question speak languages belonging to at least six different language families<sup>1</sup>, bearing witness of the fact that many of the present day populations in the course of thousands of years have migrated into the region from areas way beyond their present borders. But whereas all present-day nation-states harbour many such different language communities, each has established a single 'national language'. As such qualify Burmese in

---

<sup>1</sup> The language families in question are Austro-Asiatic (Malay Peninsula, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, Vietnam, Laos), Austronesian (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia), Sino-Tibetan (Burma, Thailand, Vietnam), Tai-Kadai (Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Burma), West Papua (North Moluccas) and Trans-New Guinea (Alor, Pantar and Timor, Indonesia).

Burma, Thai in Thailand, Lao in Laos, Vietnamese in Vietnam, Khmer in Cambodia, Malay in Malaysia, Philippino/Tagalog in the Philippines, Bahasa Indonesia in Indonesia, and English in Singapore. As a result, for many citizens of these states their mother tongue is not identical with, and sometimes even devalued in reference to, the national language.

All major world religions were established in Southeast Asia. In the course of their introduction to local societies, Hinduism (Bali, Java), Theravada Buddhism (Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia), Sunni Islam (Indonesia, Malaysia), Christianity (Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam), Confucianism and Daoism (Vietnam) were adapted to, and transformed by, these societies' beliefs and their ritually enacted ideas about the socio-political, cosmological and moral order. As a result, the basic beliefs and precepts characteristic of these world religions have acquired a distinct local character. While members of the same communities may adhere to different world religions, in the course of history such forms of religious coexistence nevertheless mostly displayed a peaceful character. However, inter-religious strife erupted towards the end of the 20th Century in various parts of Southeast Asia (between Sunni Muslims and Christians in the Moluccas, Sulawesi and Lombok in Indonesia; between Theravada Buddhists and Muslims in South Thailand; between Muslims and Christians in Mindanao in the southern Philippines). Such inter-religious confrontations have a decidedly political dimension. Most Southeast Asian nation-states tend to express their 'national identity' also in religious terms, declaring the dominant world religion within their borders as a 'state' religion and articulating their political legitimacy in according terms. This may result in pressure put on religious minorities, whose different cultural-religious identities become assessed as politically subversive. Such processes, in which the claim for religious autonomy may even be identified by the state as 'terrorist' activities actually may lead to a regressive transformation of an incumbent democratisation of the political system (see Feske and Pholpai on Thailand, this volume). In the case of Indonesia, in which in spite of its overwhelming number of Muslim citizens no single religion is proclaimed to represent the state exclusively, a perceived lack of legitimacy of the political system has led to the demand for a moral purification of the system formulated in Muslim terms (Permata, this volume).

With the exception of Thailand, all Southeast Asian nation-states have come into being in the course of the global processes of de-colonisation. Each state encompasses numerous different ethno-linguistic groups, some of which are resident in more than one state alone (e.g. Karen in Burma and Thailand, Bajau in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, Hmong in Thailand, Laos and Vietnam). Some such ethno-linguistic groups represent in quantitative, cultural and political respect the dominant population in a single nation-state (e.g. Javanese in Indonesia, Thai in Thailand, Khmer in Cambodia, Burmese in Burma). The values and their symbolisations, propagated as representative *par excellence* of the 'national identity' of the state in question, often derive from the cultural repertoire of such a dominant popu-

lation group within a nation. Each of the Southeast Asian nation-states therefore faces the need to integrate the *de facto* multi-cultural identities of its peoples into a coherent model of a legitimate polity that transcends such linguistic, religious and socio-political diversities. The means employed to that end vary from military repression of minorities to constitutionally granted rights to cultural autonomy. But whatever strategy applied, the foundation of these nation-states has resulted in fundamental transformations of the indigenous models of political authority and of the systems of ideas and values from which these models derived their legitimacy.<sup>2</sup>

Such latter representations of political legitimacy are culturally specific hence very diverse, yet they are remarkably comparable throughout the Southeast Asian region. Of old, political power was not legitimised in terms of legally formalised, popular sovereignty but authorised by mythically articulated and ritually enacted relations connecting the living with spirits and ancestors. The latter often are acknowledged as the ultimate original owners of the natural resources and as the sources of the political power and ritual authority distributed across various offices. The cosmological order thus sanctions the social, political and moral order of the society in question (Engelkamp on Burma, this volume). In some Southeast Asian states such models still inform the ceremonial enactment of political authority at national (e.g. Malaysia and Thailand) or regional (e.g. Indonesia, Laos) levels, yet in all nation-states such models of representations and values increasingly collide with the institution of state sovereignty and the concomitant state monopolisation of territorial rights, political and military power and juridical authority. Such models also may conflict with the basic axioms of market economics. This is evident from the fact that in many parts of Southeast Asia property rights of economic resources and production processes are increasingly conceptualised in market economic terms and their products commercially valued. Likewise standards of professional education that are geared towards the formation of 'human capital', hence are predicated on the valorisation of human beings primarily in reference to their contribution to the national Gross Domestic Product, may basically contradict cultural systems of value - both at local and at national levels (Hegemann on Malaysia, this volume).

The current processes of the radical monetisation of goods and services and their distribution and evaluation on global markets not only strengthens such trends, they even call into question the very authority of a state that claims to have replaced such indigenous models of authority and ownership (Hiltner, this volume). The newly adopted charter of ASEAN in fact is predicated on a model of legitimacy that transcends the autonomy of the state as the sole bearer of legitimate political authority. ASEAN thus could serve as a means to counteract the eroding impact of the economic globalisation by matching trans-national economic processes with trans-national, semi-global political institutions. However, it appears that at least some of

---

<sup>2</sup> Cp. J. Platenkamp & M. Prager, 'Südostasiatische Völker und Kulturen', *Brockhaus Enzyklopaedie* Band 26:616-7, 2007.

its member states rather instrumentalise this framework to protect and advance their own national economic and political interest (Volkman, this volume).

It goes without saying that the contributions to this volume in no way claim to cover the processes of transformation taking place in the various Southeast Asian nation-states in all their dimensions. But they may serve as an indication of their complexity and underline the need for further concerted, multi-disciplinary research.

[Graduate School of Politics der WWU Münster: [www.uni-muenster.de/GraSP/](http://www.uni-muenster.de/GraSP/)]