

Developmental States and Hybrid Regimes in South-east Asia: The Socio-economic and Political Challenges of Global Crises (1998-2008)

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Summary

This article presents a critical review of socio-economic and political development in South-east Asia (1998-2008) and promotes the hypothesis that there is little linkage, if any, between economic growth, social change and democracy in this region. The economic success of East/South-east Asia was primarily due to good governance by neo-authoritarian developmental states born in the context of “cold” and “hot” wars during the 1950s-70s. Since the East Asian financial crisis of 1997-98 and beyond the global depression of 2008-9, South-east Asian developmental regimes have shifted into various forms of hybridization combining state and market forces on the economic front, authoritarianism and democratization in politics. Such pragmatic hybridization has met with little opposition from civil society, except in Thailand, despite the severe impacts of two successive economic crises and an increase in social inequality. The hybridization of economics and politics may keep most South-east Asian regimes away from the Western type of liberal democracy and thus challenge its universal validity.

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Introduction

The question of linkages between democracy and development has been intensely discussed among historians, philosophers, economists, political scientists and sociologists, but no definite and universal answer has been found as yet. The “East Asian developmental state” model and the Asian values debate during the late 1980s and early 1990s coincided with Huntington’s concept of the third wave of democracy and with Fukuyama’s “end of history”. These concepts challenged the universal validity of liberal democracy and market economics, especially from an Oriental viewpoint (Diamond 1997, 1999). The Asian financial crisis of 1997-98, the global economic crisis of 2008-9 and their economic and social impacts in South-east Asia may have pointed further in this direction.

Interestingly enough, back in the 1950s the United Nations predicted some bright prospects for development and democracy for a number of newly independent nations in South-east Asia, targeting Burma and the Philippines in particular. In