

The evolution of Southeast Asian democracy



The growth of participatory democracy in the region is one of the issues of interest to the Southeast Asia International Affairs Programme at LSE IDEAS. In this connection, the workshop that was organised in February on “Democratisation and new forms of voter mobilisation”, driven by Research Fellow Dr. Eva-Lotta Hedman, was not only relevant to the programme, but also ground-breaking as there had been no such focus before. While the workshop pointed to the need for more research to draw general conclusions and to anticipate likely future developments, the papers presented (extracts of which are reproduced in this Special Report) and the discussions that took place captured a vibrant phenomenon in the democratic process in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand which makes full use of the offerings of ICT (information and communication technology) while also employing the more traditional means of garnering political support.

While here in London we are in the midst of twittering about the British general election campaign, in Southeast Asia (with the Philippines also running into an election this May) there is no less excitement, not least in the digital sphere, that great equaliser. Of course, I would need to qualify this by stating we are here talking about the processes, and not the institutions, of democracy. Indeed during the discussion at the end of the workshop this point came up: there has been greater progress in advancing the democratic process in Southeast Asia than there has been in the establishment of the institutions, principles and practices of liberal democracy.

Having said that, it might well be to the good if we were to reflect on the likely evolution of Southeast Asian democracy which the papers here presented encourage. Clearly, there is not going to be a one-size-fits all situation, even among Southeast Asian states, let alone in comparison with western liberal democracies. As I write this, a rather extreme form of physical and direct democratic expression has been taking place in the streets of Bangkok, even as websites open up or are closed down and radio programmes scream the messages of dissent or support for the government. In the Philippines electoral campaign political murder takes place side by side with some rather snazzy appeals in the digital sphere. It is therefore necessary that a mental note is made that the history of democratic development, not just in Southeast Asia, has been a mixed and uncertain one – however excited one might be by the growth of participatory democracy in these new forms of voter mobilisation.

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