

# THE FAILURE OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND POLITICAL DEMOCRACY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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IN EXAMINING THE REASON FOR THE UNDOUBTED FAILURE of development and democracy in the countries of Southeast Asia it is necessary to notice the changes (the social changes above all) that have occurred in this region in the last hundred years. A hundred years ago the societies of Southeast Asia had an attitude of mind which had been typical of Europe at an earlier period, an attitude of acceptance. Southeast Asia in the 19th century was very much a traditional society. There were, and there had been for centuries, outside contacts and clashes, but these were never sufficient to shake, let alone break, the traditional way of life. The mysteries and miseries of that life were accepted apathetically by people with eyes and minds traditionally blinkered into believing that what had been must be, and that life and society could not be altered.

A traditional society can be very strong, it can hold together through millennia provided that there is no major attack upon it; and it is possible to trace back many features of this traditional way of life for hundreds of years.

Of course in Southeast Asia these traditional patterns varied from country to country. The structure of a traditional Malay State for example differed considerably from that say, of Ava, while there was the world of difference between the government of a Borneo tribe and the sophisticated administration of Vietnam. But despite these differences, each and every one of them was a traditional society, accepting what had gone before, unchanging in nearly everything.

The capital city was often the only city, a royal town situated deep in the centre of its agricultural lands. Rice growing was the main crop, and the padi fields marched right up to the city's edge. Padi growing placed a very great social value on conformity. All the procedures for its successful cultivation had been evolved centuries earlier. The best way to secure a good crop was to do exactly as had been done before. The innovator, the experimenter, was socially objectionable. The emphasis was perpetually on conformity, producing an obedient society.

This society was a hierarchical one, with peasants and courtiers. There were few middle class people, for there was little trade; the coastline was deserted and each State was virtually entire unto itself, existing on a subsistence economy. The peasants grew the padi and the courtiers flocked

around the royal ruler. The capital town then was not a place of industry, nor a port, but was an inland centre, an integral part of the agricultural environment. Early descriptions of Ayuthia, Ava, Angkor and other early capitals, even Hue on the coast, all give clearly this picture of a royal city in a static unchanging countryside, where a court protected a traditional faith and carried out traditional administrative functions above an obedient peasantry.

However, there were exceptions to this. Malacca was a bustling sea port before the 19th century; and in its inter-continental contacts and tolerant multi-racialism it represented the modern ocean port far more than a traditional royal centre. Another exception is provided in the early history of Java, where a number of States emerged. There were inland kingdoms based on wet rice production, were hierarchical and possessed a capital where ruler and religion (but never commerce) were situated. These inland kingdoms were static, traditional societies as with other states elsewhere in Southeast Asia. In contrast however there were a number of coastal commercial States based on maritime power. Sri Vijaya, although in Sumatra, is typical of these. Also the harbours of north Java produced a number of small sea-port States. As J. D. Legge says in his book *Indonesia*, "the maritime principalities were cosmopolitan in character and of necessity demonstrated a degree of social equality and tolerance that contrasted sharply with the hierarchy of the land-based kingdoms."<sup>1</sup> He adds that there was "fluctuating tension between the two types."

These small ports were exceptions to the general rule. They lacked the strength that inter-continental trade in great quantity brings, and did not survive. They were merely small ports around an Asian Mediterranean, and it was not until the 19th century that some of static agricultural States of Southeast Asia received a sustained blow, delivered in the first instance by Europeans operating in particular through ocean ports.

Throughout the 19th century the European trader developed the foothold he had secured earlier on unwanted swamp or deserted island. No established society stopped him, no traditional ruler checked him. Calcutta, Rangoon, Penang, Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai and other ocean ports gradually developed more and more clearly as new phenomena. Particularly was this marked after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Suddenly the west and east were brought very much closer together. From that date Europe spread out over Southeast Asia; and a European dominance, directed through these ports, came to be exercised over nearly all of the area.

The "westernization" or, better the "modernization" of Southeast Asia that began with the Suez Canal, was brought by restless Europeans, but it

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<sup>1</sup> James D. Legge, *Indonesia* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 29.

became an attitude that was readily accepted by an increasing number of Asians. A hundred years ago it was a marked characteristic only of the European to try always to change things. In their own societies, in Europe, they never left the situation as it was. In their attempts to make life better for themselves or for the next generation, the Europeans were constantly, appallingly, active. The social ideal of acceptance or even contentment was not for them. That ideal had vanished long before. By the 19th century the dominant ideal was development. The critical mind and the inquiring spirit was prized, while traditional beliefs and traditional authority were challenged everywhere and overthrown.

Increasingly, this new dogma of development was accepted by Asians, particularly those in the port cities. Here the static society of the interior did not exist. Indeed, a marked feature of the ocean ports has been their history of social change. The power of the traditional inland ruler was scarcely felt, if at all, and none of the social pressures to conform, as faced the young padi planter, faced the young man in these new port-cities. Not merely was he free from the agricultural environment (Singapore was outstanding in this respect), but also he was in most cases an immigrant, who had escaped from both parental control and the social conventions and rigidity of the unchanging village of his homeland. Further, in most cases, the sea port was cosmopolitan, and the power of the established religious order of the interior was also necessarily dissipated.

Thus social mobility became commonplace in these cosmopolitan cities, and those that succeeded were those who sought out, in an individualistic way, the possibilities of success offered by changing circumstances. Unfettered by tradition, these Asians became not merely socially egalitarian and economically advanced, but also politically anti-colonial. The role of the port is essential in understanding the political history of modern Southeast Asia. It would be inconceivable to narrate Burmese nationalism, for example, without referring to the leading role of Rangoon, or Indonesia without Djakarta. In each country circumstances were different, because the sea port had established a different balance.

Where the sea port did not exist, as in Thailand and Cambodia,<sup>2</sup> the royal city-capital and the traditional power remained. Elsewhere the greater impact of outside ideas in the port and its readiness to adapt and change to meet the changing circumstances established it as the leader of its country, and confirmed it as the new capital of a developing society.

The primary response of the nationalists of 20th century Southeast Asia to the European imperialists was to demand from them the political

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<sup>2</sup> In this respect it is interesting to speculate on the political and sociological effects of the establishment of Cambodia's first ocean port, at Sihanoukville, and the breaking of the bar at the mouth of the Menam in 1951, permitting ocean-going vessels to move up to Bangkok for the first time.

institutions these Europeans had established over them. Everywhere this has been achieved. The secondary response was a demand for a developing society. A "new modern economic order to replace the inherited one"<sup>3</sup> was increasingly desired. The dogma of the West was accepted by an urban minority of the East, and the conflicts that now exist in Southeast Asian States establish this as one of the major problems of nation building; for these internal conflicts exist precisely because modernizing minorities everywhere are attempting to challenge and transform these still traditional societies.

In the anti-colonial movements only an educated elite was involved, and the struggle was a mere episode in history. It is now over. A new elite has replaced the old, and in some cases it is dangerously traditional. One pyramid of power has been replaced by another. Those at the base of the pyramid are still the same. In this continuing conflict between a traditional society sanctified by custom and religion and a modern world of development, all Southeast Asia is involved, not merely an elite. It is not a mere episode, either. Nearly all will be participants for a very long time.

The idea of modernization has come to be accepted by many in Southeast Asia, and if its implementation is far slower than they hoped for, to many others the results of what that modernization is actually producing are most distasteful. It is not easy for men to concede that their ancestral values are inadequate and to abandon them for an alien system. There have been violent protests by traditionalists against the doctrines of the modernists. In some cases, as the economic development process has emanated from Europe, it has been possible to halt or delay this by enlisting a still vigorous anti-imperialist emotionalism. In other places the established and traditional authorities, of religion or state, have endeavoured to delay or thwart modernizing moves initiated by a less traditional urban leadership. Examples of this are the Church in the Philippines and the State in Cambodia. The strength of the traditionalists, despite the modernizing leadership in the port-cities, is still very strong (particularly in those countries governed by inland capitals) and factors making for a retardation of development, consequently, are numerous. These factors make for major conflicts in Southeast Asia.

The economic development of the State however is increasingly hoped for and indeed expected. Mass education is one major factor assisting in that expectation. Hardly any traditional leader can withstand the demand for education, and even if it is watered down and made as innocuous as possible, it still produces this result. Education produces dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction or discontent is the key to change. As a result, as Maurice Zinkin has

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Shills in *Old Societies & New States*, ed. by C. Geertz (New York, Free Press, 1963), p. 2.

said in his still useful study, "economic development has therefore become in almost all the countries of Asia the dominating question of the day."<sup>4</sup>

Urbanization is another factor working against the traditionalist. Many efforts are made in Malaysia and elsewhere, to keep the peasant on the land, even though in terms of agricultural efficiency there may be too many on the land already. These efforts merely delay and in no material way divert this major phenomenon. Once in the town, the break with traditional authority becomes ever more clear and the desire for development greater. It is a characteristic of traditional or conservative leadership to suspect "the urban masses," and no wonder, for coupled with the demand for economic development there also occurs a demand for social justice. This demand takes the form of political action and urban-based political parties invariably are opposed to traditional authority. Such authority can only remain in power if it accepts development as its major responsibility in nation building.

Moving outwards from the cities of Southeast Asia (and particularly the ocean ports) a psychological revolution is convincing the peasant that he does not have to be poor. It is possible to be prosperous. His country need not be one of the undeveloped areas of the world. Some people in it are wealthy, and he at least could be better off. The political move to oust the colonialists is over, and its experience seems to have little relevance to this economic issue. More and more, he is discontented; he wants hospitals, schools and a developing nation.

This new attitude, this implied readiness to accept new values, imposes a new responsibility upon the political leadership. If this demand for development is not met, then in all probability those leaders will have to go. A nation must be built, or else revolution will come. The downfall of U Nu in Burma is an example. However (and here many feel that the political leadership in many Southeast Asian countries has failed to respond to the implication) dissatisfaction with the past in itself will not produce a new State. A change of attitude is not sufficient. The people have to be willing to take the necessary steps, positive, active and in many cases unpleasant steps, to secure development. But it is encumbrant upon the leaders to show clearly what those steps are. The pattern of procedure, the willingness to work, to save, to invest, must be hammered home. The whole new pattern of values must be reiterated, and shown to be the ideal of the political elite. This is the responsibility of the Government. A leadership must be given. Unpleasant things must be said. The Government should set the tone, and maintain it, and drag the traditionally minded people away from beliefs, actions and attitudes that retard development. In public, speech after speech, this elite should drive home the often unpalatable truths, and (far more than

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<sup>4</sup> Maurice Zinkin, *Development for Free Asia* (London, Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 3.

in the developed nations where this attitude is already accepted) it should always lead. In particular, the political leaders must put more emphasis on work, and less on leisure; less on contentment, and more on development. Otherwise it will never come, under their aegis, and a discontented people may seek other ways of securing that goal.

The role of the politician in the development of the State, in this task of nation building, is vital. He has an awareness of man's deepest instincts lacking in an economist. No economic growth, no nation building is possible unless an entrepreneurial class can be produced, men with initiative, vigour and capital. But this class is powerless, unless it can work with a political elite that has the power and the will to provide a policy framework and a general community acceptance of developmental ideals favourable for the exercise of entrepreneurial talents, whether in the public or the private sector. And in this position, it is the politician, far better than the economist, who can infuse this people with the awareness that old prejudices, old attitude, both secular and religious, stand in the way of such nation building. It is a basic task of the political leader to have them follow him and accept the necessary implications of hard work, savings, encouragement to the entrepreneur, economically wise investment and the rest which can ensure the building of a nation.

This basic task, in my opinion, has not been accepted with sufficient verve and responsibility by many political leaders in Southeast Asia. Singapore is an almost solitary exception. The acceptance of the ideal of hard work in particular has not become a reality and Southeast Asia suffers because of this. With too much emphasis on other aspects of their position, many political leaders have failed to move their people in the way that economic growth demands. They have failed to provide leadership. The failure of economic growth in Southeast Asia, desired so fervently by the people, is a political failure.

There are many other problems affecting nation building in Southeast Asia. I feel that those concerned with the feelings attached to economic growth are the most important and, as a consequence, I have devoted the major part of this essay to them. Nevertheless, I would like to submit for examination three other problems involved in nation building, all part of the struggle towards a modern society in a situation in which the population of the area involved is neither modern nor a single society.

The complexity, the plurality, of its society is a problem Malaysia shares with Burma, Indonesia with the Philippines, Thailand with Vietnam. Only in Cambodia is there a basically homogeneous population. Elsewhere the boundaries of the new State embrace a number of races, speaking different languages, worshipping different gods, and trying to preserve their distinction from one another. One major problem is to have these peoples think more

of their State and less of their race, and at the same time to have the dominant elite in Burma, Malaysia and elsewhere accept that integration does not mean assimilation, that solidarity is different from hegemony and that diversity need not be a force of disruption but a stimulus and an asset. Communalism demands statesmanship, for latent conflict is an inevitable consequence of the structure of a plural society. Hostile prejudices are part of the cultural equipment of us all. The challenge of communalism (perhaps in Malaysia above all, where political and economic power are not both concentrated in the hands of any single community) demands that these prejudices be suppressed, the situation controlled, and that political realities be accepted.<sup>5</sup>

Nation building in Southeast Asia faces the associated problem of regionalism. National minority races in particular, grouped in one area, communally different, are apt to regard the central government as hardly less alien, and possibly more insensitive, than the colonial government it has replaced. The latter had endeavoured, often, merely to keep the peace and preserve the status quo. The new government, in many cases inexperienced, was a rude surprise. The Shan States of Burma, Sarawak in Malaysia, the Moslems in the Philippines, the Hill Tribes of Vietnam, all have responded with a regional animosity towards the hegemony of the new States.

Peculiar to Malaysian nation building has been the problem of Singapore. The ocean port has been thrust out and separated from its natural hinterland. The founder of the Malayan Chinese Association, Tan Cheng Lock, many years ago, said "this separation of the two States is unfortunate, and will without doubt be terminated one day in favour of a single united Malayan State."<sup>6</sup> This problem, however, besides reflecting the clash between the ocean port and the inland capital, is linked inextricably (as these problems often are) to the communal problem and to that of regionalism as well. Only the overriding and effective demand for economic growth will solve it.

In this basic problem of economic growth in nation building, the question of democracy in Southeast Asia has merely a peripheral interest. It has been a failure. The introduction of it to this area came very belatedly, except in the Philippines, and as a method of political representation it did not long survive the withdrawal of the imperialist powers. In those countries where it was introduced the western educated elite formed parties which were modelled, in an unadventurous way, on the Western image. But political theories and parties in the West had evolved out of a whole interconnected history of politics and life in an environment totally different from Southeast Asia. Why should that have relevance to Asia? In Asian countries these political parties (excluding the Chinese Communist Party) endeavoured

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<sup>5</sup> *Communalism and the Political Process in Malaya* by K.J. Ratman (OUP, 1965) provides an excellent study of this issue.

<sup>6</sup> Malayan Chinese Association (M.C.A.) memorandum to the Singapore Constitutional Commission, 1953, p. 1.

merely to reproduce the slogans and policies of the West, without attempting to re-think their position in terms of their own environment. Their failure to become indigenous was disguised when the major cry was independence, but once that had been achieved the political leaders soon found that their inability to adapt themselves made them impotent. They withered and died. Where are the Asian political parties of ten years ago? Where is democracy?

A parliamentary system survives in the Philippines because it has become Filipinized, with characteristics that are now indigenous. It may well continue, provided that economic growth ensues. It has survived so far in Malaysia (and one could add in India) not because it has any basic roots but because it does not yet inhibit the exercise of power by the ruling class. As soon as real opposition to this dominance emerges through the medium of democratic procedures, and a possible new government begins to be seen, the desire to abandon democracy and probably parliamentary institutions as well will certainly increase. The desire could well become irresistible. As a goal, democracy is expendable, whereas economic growth is not. No Asian country has a fundamental belief that democracy has any superior moral virtue, and I can not imagine anywhere in Southeast Asia that an alternative government, replacing the interest now in power, would be permitted by democratic processes.

Even now, the concept of a loyal opposition, where it exists at all, has a tenuous life, and political criticism is often bitterly resented as treason. More and more the one party system can be expected to be adopted, as possibly more acceptable to those holding power as an institution likely to preserve that power and to assist (if in competent hands) in solving the problems of nation building. Some aspects of democracy may function inside that institution, or it may become increasingly authoritarian. In different parts of Southeast Asia, both are possibilities; but in any assessment of democracy as a political method and development as a political goal the former has far less validity and far less indigenous life among the countries of Southeast Asia.

In Europe, the particular role played by political democracy in the modernization of that area, and the progress of equality, has been such a central theme that democracy and modernization (development, if you like) have seemed synonymous. But this particular role has been the result of starting from a particular cultural base. The European traditional heritage played a basic part in this development, in the shaping of democracy and the progress of equality.

There is no reason to expect democracy to evolve out of the modernization of Southeast Asia, for of course its process of modernization will also be shaped and conditioned by its very different traditional heritage. Egalitarian politics may well continue to crowd the sea ports in particular, and



increasingly control the urban areas; but political democracy need not develop from them. Political institutions, more logically, may well evolve shaped by the influence of the traditional past of Southeast Asia. The path taken towards modernization and development involves increasing contacts with the developed nations in particular, and this too will affect political developments; but until a political system really acceptable to the modernizers has been established, the problems of nation building and growth in Southeast Asia, and the spectre of insecurity and instability, will continue.