

Southeast Asia

The institutional imperative: The politics of equitable development in Southeast Asia

By ERIK MARTINEZ KUHONTA

Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011. Pp. 342. Maps, Illustrations, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

doi:10.1017/S0022463412000446

Few development theorists and workers in the field will disagree with Erik Kuhonta's central thesis 'that institutional power and capacity, along with pragmatic ideology, are crucial to the pursuit of equitable development' (p. 4). For the past decade or so, it has been conventional wisdom to nominate state institutions and their capacity to formulate and implement policy as the critical variable in national economic growth. Kuhonta's chief concern, however, is equitable development and explaining what it is that distinguishes nations that achieve growth with equity from those that grow economically, but fail to share the benefits with all sectors of society, especially the rural poor.

Using a comparative historical approach, he studies the growth trajectories and development outcomes of Malaysia and Thailand, and secondarily, those of the Philippines and Vietnam, and concludes that the key factor — his 'prescriptive claim' — in successful pro-poor social reforms is the institutionalised political party that, effectively interventionist in power, is itself governed by pragmatic ideology and moderate policies. Institutionalised parties, he explains, provide the 'organizational weapon' necessary for a state to implement social reforms (p. 9).

It is not difficult to justify this argument with positive examples. After all, the scenario of economic growth under single-party, authoritarian government is hardly uncommon in East and Southeast Asia. It is far more difficult to make the argument convincing. The 'institutionalised party' might deliver growth along the lines of a modern Singapore, for instance, but it might equally result in a contemporary North Korea. And here is the rub, because in order to justify an 'ends and means' argument, the author has to cut the head to fit the hat.

According to all relevant statistical evidence (particularly the Gini coefficient), Kuhonta claims, Malaysia has been the most successful case of equitable development in Southeast Asia and this is due to the careful implementation of pro-poor reforms according to the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO)'s New Economic Policy (NEP) to redress the economic standing of the majority Malays (*bumiputeras*). He admits that the statistics are contested and says that he does not intend 'to deny or gloss over the unpalatable aspects of Malaysia's development', although this is what he does to a very large extent. 'The reality of politics,' he concedes, 'is that the public goods we desire, such as development, stability, democracy, and equity, cannot always emerge as a "clean" package ... some public goods have to be sacrificed for the attainment of others ... authoritarianism has historically gone hand in hand with economic growth.' (p. 13)

This is a dangerous, if engrossing argument. There are not many scholars these days who dare to challenge the primacy of democratic principles in modern nation-building

exercises. We are more likely to read about the evil consequences of rent-seeking, clientelism and neo-patrimonialism for states that are captured by such ‘institutionalised parties’. Kuhonta does not ignore these issues, but he reminds the reader that these outcomes are not the concern of his thesis. The new capitalist class that has emerged under the NEP may be a rentier class, he argues, but this concern is relevant only to the extent that it has detracted from reducing poverty and income inequality.

Kuhonta writes very well and the argument is stylishly presented. Paradoxically, the most engaging and interesting sections of the book deal with those nations that have failed to deliver equitable growth, Thailand and the Philippines. His account of Malaysia, unfortunately, contains too many echoes of ‘spin’ from the UMNO archives and more than a hint of the Asian values myth propounded by former prime minister, Mahathir Mohamed, to attract us to his side. The section on Vietnam is brief and adds very little to what is generally known. The appendix relating to Fiji, Guyana and Sri Lanka is too cursory to add weight to the thesis and could just as well have been deleted.

The author knows full well that his thesis is controversial. He constantly repeats and defends his argument ‘that organizational power for social reform does not have to have an elective affinity with leftist ideology, nor must it be rooted in a democratic regime’ (p. 24). The problem is that while he illustrates the argument well — and in doing so makes an important contribution to comparative economic studies of Southeast Asian nations — the synthesis and analysis of his findings fall short and the reader remains unconvinced and even a little fearful that there should be any debate at all that politics matters.

MARGARET SLOCOMB

Independent scholar

Safe for decolonization: The Eisenhower administration, Britain, and Singapore

By S.R. JOEY LONG

Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2011. Pp. xviii + 248. Maps, Bibliography, Index.

doi:10.1017/S0022463412000458

Joey Long presents a very solid study, well researched, insightful, fair and articulate. Long’s work will interest and benefit anyone curious about the interplay between decolonisation, the Cold War, great power foreign policy and local agency in Southeast Asia. Long brings to bear, through diligent work in multiple archives and a sound grasp of existing literature, a rare combination: an informed understanding of both American foreign policy in Southeast Asia during the Cold War and the complexities with which it engaged both allied and local agendas. He does not make the all-too-common error of reducing local agency, in this case Singapore — through Singaporeans in general and political leaders in particular — to a supporting role in a discussion of British–American Cold War discourse. Nor does he subscribe to