



HAL
open science

Southeast Asia's Political Leaders: Populists, Demagogues or Something Else?

David Frederic Camroux

► **To cite this version:**

David Frederic Camroux. Southeast Asia's Political Leaders: Populists, Demagogues or Something Else?. 2019. halshs-03151034

HAL Id: halshs-03151034

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03151034v1>

Submitted on 2 Mar 2021

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

COMPETING INTEGRATIONS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Southeast Asia's Political Leaders: Populists, Demagogues or Something Else?

Populism is characterized in the scientific literature as a thin ideology, a strategy, a political style or a combination of all three, pertinent to all political practice. Insights drawn from the observation of this global phenomenon are useful for EU policymakers to decipher political leadership in Southeast Asia. They provide a grid for evaluating Southeast Asian political leaders and exploring differences between their rhetoric and their practice. A further unpacking of populism situates and draws out contradictions both in the rhetoric and practice of political leaders. Nevertheless, a concern with individual political leaders must be brought into focus with an understanding of political structures and regime types. These three analytical grids placed in an overlay, allow for an analysis that can help generate policy responses.

Populism studies have become a sub-discipline in the areas of comparative politics and comparative sociology. Yet a great deal of this literature looks at the demand side, in particular populations while perhaps not giving sufficient attention to the supply side of those political leaders who create and encourage the populist demand. With its diversity of political cultures, regime types and types of leadership, Southeast Asia provides a rich terrain for such study and a challenge to policy makers.

David Camroux, March 2019



INTRODUCTION

Both in the media and in the world of academia, the observation and study of populism has become mainstream. With the exponential growth in the academic literature, including the publication of several hefty handbooks, populism studies have become a sub-discipline in the areas of comparative politics and comparative sociology. Yet a great deal of this literature looks at the demand side (amongst the population), while, perhaps, not giving sufficient attention to the supply side (the political leaders) who both emerge and create or, at least, encourage the populist demand. With its diversity of political cultures, regime types and types of leadership, Southeast Asia provides

a rich terrain for such study. This is precisely the objective of studies conducted by researchers in Work Package 3 and Work Package 4 of the CRISEA project.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

Understanding Political Leaders

Jan-Werner Müller has argued that "... populism is not a matter of a specific psychological cast, a particular class, or simplistic policies...populism is not just any mobilization strategy that appeals to "the people"... populists do not just criticize elites; they also claim that they, and only they, represent the true people." (Müller 2016, 40)

In the literature the distinction is made between populism as a 'thin' ideology i.e. one that can co-exist with multiple other ideologies, as merely a strategy to obtain popular support or, as a performative style, a form of behaviour in front of the media and the people designed to show that he/she is "one of us". In Southeast Asia today, it is revealing to contrast a conservative monarchist, General Prayut Chan-o-cha, as he attempted to frame his policies with populist appeal in order to become legitimized as an elected, rather than military-imposed, Prime Minister with President Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, a self-proclaimed socialist, able to frame his pro-capitalist economic policies in a populist garb. Mahathir Mohamad, on the other hand, resurrected as a committed democrat, continues the ethno-nationalist appeal that he successfully used in his twenty-year period of Prime Minister under a regime with regular elections that were neither totally free nor fair. The third kind is illustrated by

Duterte's 'war on drugs' and Cambodia's ostensibly unmoveable leader Hun Sen. Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi's populism may be more difficult to categorize. When in opposition as a democratic icon, her mystique and popularity had two sources: the uncton from the international community and, something, very locally Burmese, the incarnation of a *minlaung* ('imminent king'), "one who overthrows an unjust ruler and restores benevolent rule in accordance with Buddhist principles" (Harriden 2012). As the *de facto* civilian president under the surveillance of the military in a hybrid regime she has, at least partly, embraced a more xenophobic language and style much different from her more inclusive populist appeal when in opposition.

Four main axes of populist behaviour have been identified based on Gagnon (2018: vi-xxvi), which, irrespective of whether one wants to apply the term populist or not, have the advantage of providing a template for examining and comparing political leaders. They are: (1) Exclusionary – inclusionary; (2) Xenophobic – cosmopolitan; (3) Authoritarian – democratic; and (4) Market fundamentalist – redistributive.

- Exclusion or inclusion is central to the appeal of political leaders whether they be populists or not. Populist politicians are in principle anti-elite: a corrupt elite being juxtaposed against the real, or worthy people. Rodrigo Duterte might inveigh against "Manila imperialism," but in practice he has accommodated himself to the business elites in the Philippines' capital. His exclusion operates at the other end of the social spectrum: the unworthy people in the slums who are drug users and dealers, or his former Communist allies. In multi-cultural societies such as Malaysia and Myanmar, the issue of exclusion or inclusion is even more relevant. In Myanmar, seventy years after independence, developing an inclusive language and practice to embrace non-Bamar Buddhists is a work in progress. In Malaysia, a programme of ethnic inclusiveness was central to the victory of the *Pakatan Harapan* coalition in the May 2018 federal elections, the country's first political alternance since independence. Yet once elected, the new government has found that reforming the positive discrimination policies in favour of the *bumiputra* (essentially Malay) population has engendered a wholesale pushback. In the Thai elections of March 2019, General Prayut emulated former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's inclusive populist appeals to voters in the north and north-east of Thailand to have his usurped Prime Ministerial position legitimized by a popular vote. By their nature one-party regimes, such as that in Vietnam, generate a more inclusive political rhetoric albeit one expressed in unconvincing patriotic Marxist terms.

- Situating populist leaders along the axis of authoritarianism and democracy, the political rhetoric and practice of newly re-elected Indonesian President Joko Widodo is interesting. It contradicts the assumption that Southeast Asian leaders would generally be authoritarian. For Widodo, only a democratic process can provide political legitimacy. Similarly, Rodrigo Duterte's performance has all the traits of an authoritarian strongman, yet, there is no indication he will try to

prolong his term in office beyond 2022. Besides, the opportunists who have switched allegiance to him in the Philippines Congress have shown that they will not allow him to do so. Hun Sen in Cambodia and Prayut Chan-o-cha in Thailand, on the other hand, undermining the democratic system is paving the road towards a form of electoral autocratic rule. In Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy know that only the democratic process provides them the legitimacy to compete with the military, who portray themselves as the custodians of national unity.

- The populist-type language used by many politicians in Southeast Asia is in essence redistributive. Nonetheless, they may still not support redistributive economic policies in practice. This is the case of Thai PM Prayut who has shown no inclination to reform an economic system that has engendered the most inegalitarian society in the region, and of President Duterte, a self-declared socialist, whose faith in market mechanisms backs his efforts to attract private and overseas infrastructure investments. In Indonesia redistributive measures such as more widespread health care and improved educational facilities rely on improving the functioning of the existing capitalist system, not on overthrowing it. In Vietnam, Communist leaders making the economy more market-friendly for investors, do so while still accommodating their own vested interests in State Owned Enterprises.

Regime types

Southeast Asia's diversity is manifest in its gamut of political regime types ranging from Brunei's authoritarian monarchy to Indonesia's vibrant and decentralized democracy. In which regime type does populism flourish the most? It seems that for a populist leader there is greater political space to function in a presidential system (such as the republican Philippines or Indonesia) than in a parliamentary constitutional monarchy. In a semi-constitutional monarchy such as Thailand, where the king is a key political actor with a large number of prerogatives (the scope of which has increased in the last two years) there is little room for a paternalist leader who attempts to **implement** populist policies to remain in power. As recent history has shown, former Thai PMs Thaksin Shinawatra and his sister Yingluck were overthrown by military coups that were probably approved by the Palace, in 2006 and in 2014, respectively when they attempted to transform populist rhetoric into the instituting of populist policies.

On the contrary, Malaysia's weak constitutional monarchy with a rotation in the *Agong* every five years, did not hinder Mohammad Mahathir from dominating Malaysian politics for two decades and now anew. The latest presidential campaign in Indonesia was a fascinating example of a competition between the incumbent, Joko Widodo (Jokowi) who has been described as a 'technocratic populist', against Prabowo Subianto, the son-in-law of the Indonesian dictator Suharto, who has been described as an 'authoritarian populist'. The checks and balances, coalition-building constraints within the parliament, and the decentralized structures of Indonesian politics developed since *Reformasi* in 1998, make a return to strong-man rule unlikely.

One-party states, such as Vietnam and Laos, and virtual one-party states such as Cambodia, offer a different context. The Communist Party of Vietnam's collegial style of leadership, with a degree of internal factional democracy at its top echelons, has prevented the emergence of a populist strongman. Nguyen Tan Dung, Prime Minister from 2006-2016, found himself expelled from office after he attempted to take on a second position in the country's triumvirate of leadership. Yet in Cambodia, Hun Sen by progressively undermining the country's multi-party system while facing few challenges within his own Cambodian People's Party, has strengthened his power since becoming Prime Minister in 1985. He seems also to be grooming his son, to replace him and resembles Rodrigo Duterte who has invested considerably in his daughter Sara's political career. However, given that political dynasties (both thin and thick) control some two thirds of political positions in the Philippines, her elevation is a worrying reinforcement of the oligarchic nature of the Philippines political regime.

In Myanmar's hybrid regime, the military play a caretaker role through their control of 25% of seats in parliament and three key ministries: Defence, Home Affairs and Border Affairs (Egreteau 2016). They expelled 700,000 Rohingya in 2017 and in complicity with Islamophobic elements in the Sangha, set the political discourse that accompanies such action. Thus, the de facto civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi seems constrained to articulate an ethno-nationalist defence of their action in order to appeal to her Bamar-Buddhist electoral support base which militates in the same direction.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- The soft-balancing / soft-hedging which is common in foreign relations of most Southeast Asian countries, irrespective of regime type and leadership practice, opens space for the EU and its member states to occupy a countervailing place within the region. In the present regional context of increased Sino-American rivalry, the role of third parties, such as Japan and the EU, will increase in importance to address illiberal and populist challenges in Southeast Asia while balancing its interests and the respect for universal values. By empowering democratic institutions and democratizing actors in Southeast Asia, the EU strengthens human rights' advocacy.
- In countries where the media are still relatively free, such as the Philippines and Indonesia, the EU should give strong support for media freedom. In others, such as Cambodia, where organized opposition parties have been decimated, discrete support of the opposition via civil society groups may be the only option. In authoritarian regimes, such as Vietnam, utilizing the space of liberty in academia and cultural exchange is the default option. Present debates concerning action towards illiberal regimes such as in Myanmar and in Cambodia, raise the issue of the problematic nature of economic sanctions. Yet a targeted use of sanctions can promote respect for human rights and democratic norms.
- The EU should seek to understand the 'populist publics' that underpin the different regime types. It needs to understand how political resistance takes shape in the media, the academy and in grassroots movements, such as those of indigenous peoples. As demonstrated by the impact of sustainable forestry requirements imposed by the EU in Indonesia and sustainable fishery norms in Thailand, the weight of access to the European market counts. Being the world's largest provider of Overseas Development Assistance and a major supplier of foreign investment, the EU market power can also be harnessed in promoting the EU's ethical agenda. This is also the case of the recently signed EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement which strengthens labour rights.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Competing Regional Integrations in Southeast Asia (CRISEA) is an interdisciplinary research project that studies multiple forces affecting regional integration in Southeast Asia and the challenges they present to the peoples of Southeast Asia and its regional institutional framework, ASEAN.

CRISEA innovates by encouraging 'macro-micro' dialogue between disciplines: global level analyses in international relations and political economy alongside socio-cultural insights from the grassroots methodologies of social sciences and the humanities.

Coordinated by the Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) with its unique network of ten field centres in Southeast Asia, the project brings together researchers from seven European and six Southeast Asian institutions, with three objectives:

1. Research on regional integration

Multiple internal and external forces drive regional integration in Southeast Asia and compete for resources and legitimacy. CRISEA has identified five 'arenas of competition' for the interplay of these forces, investigated in the project's five research Work Packages. It further aims to assess the extent to which they call into question the centrality of ASEAN's regional model.

2. Policy relevance

CRISEA reaches beyond academia to engage in public debate and impact on practitioners in government and non-government spheres. By establishing mechanisms for dialogue with targeted audiences of policymakers, stakeholders and the public, the project furthers European science diplomacy in Southeast Asia and promotes evidence-based policymaking.

3. Networking and capacity-building

CRISEA reinforces the European Research Area (ERA) in the field of Asian Studies through coordinated EU-ASEAN academic exchange and network development. It connects major research hubs with emerging expertise across Europe and Southeast Asia. CRISEA also promotes participation of younger generation academics in all its activities, notably policy dialogues.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	Competing Integrations in Southeast Asia (CRISEA)
COORDINATOR	Andrew Hardy, EFEO, Paris, France, hardyvn25@yahoo.com.
CONSORTIUM	Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient – EFEO – Paris, France University of Hamburg – UHAM – Hamburg, Germany University of Naples l'Orientale – UNO – Naples, Italy Institute of Social and Political Sciences – ISCSP - Lisbon, Portugal University of Lodz - UL – Lodz, Poland University of Oslo – UiO – Oslo, Norway University of Cambridge – Cam – Cambridge, UK Chiang Mai University – CMU – Chiang Mai, Thailand The Centre for Strategic and International Studies - CSIS – Jakarta, Indonesia Ateneo de Manila University – ADMU – Quezon City, Philippines University of Malaya – UM – Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences – VASS – Hanoi, Vietnam The University of Mandalay – MU – Mandalay, Myanmar
FUNDING SCHEME	H2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation of the European Union – Research Innovation Action (RIA) – Europe in a changing world, Engaging together globally
DURATION	November 2017 – October 2020 (36 months).
BUDGET	EU contribution: €2,500,000.00
WEBSITE	www.crisea.eu
FOR MORE INFORMATION	Contact: Jacques LEIDER, CRISEA scientific coordinator – jacques.leider@efeo.net Elisabeth LACROIX, CRISEA project manager – ideas.lacroix@gmail.com
FURTHER READING	Müller, Jan Werner. <i>What is Populism?</i> Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. Harriden, Jessica. <i>The Authority of Influence: Women and Power in Burmese History</i> . Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2012. Gagnon, Jean-Paul <i>et al.</i> “What is Populism? Who is the Populist?”, <i>Democratic Theory</i> 5 (2) 2018: vi-xxvi. Egreteau, Renaud. <i>Caretaking Democratization: The Military and Political Change in Myanmar</i> , London: Hurst, 2016.