

2024 Edition

H2 History Guide

Political Stability

(Sample)

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Access the effectiveness of democracy in establishing and maintaining political stability in Southeast Asia.

In Southeast Asia, the prevalent experience with democracy has largely been shaped by the Western concept of parliamentary democracy. While the Western model of parliamentary democracy was adopted, its success and longevity have been markedly inconsistent and short-lived. Democracy failed to gain significant civilian participation in Southeast Asia due to a lack of political tutelage by colonial masters and a deep-rooted history and familiarity of authoritarian rule. Furthermore, ineffectual leadership also contributed to the downfall of democracy, with the military emerging as the more capable institution in achieving political stability in Southeast Asia. That said, when colonial masters adequately prepared these countries for democracy, it fared better in achieving political stability. However, the success of democracy in such cases was largely due to the adoption of authoritarian measures.

The absence of political tutelage and a deep-rooted history of authoritarian rule hindered the longevity of democracy in Southeast Asia. Indonesia serves as an example, where the introduction of democracy after the civil war between the Republic of Indonesia and the Dutch empire from 1945 to 1949 was met with limited voter participation. A lack of awareness and strong ideological divisions resulted in no major party gaining strong support in the 1955 general elections. Similarly, Thailand, without a colonial master and accustomed to monarchic authoritarian rule, experienced low electoral participation during its brief democratic period from 1932 to 1938. The political elites held little regard for the poor, and the "People's Party" prioritized personal interests over political engagement. These instances underscore the challenges faced by nascent democracies in Southeast Asia, where historical and societal legacies significantly impeded the implementation and sustenance of democratic systems.

The efficacy of democracy in fostering political stability was significantly compromised by ineffective leadership, leading to the military often being perceived as a more capable guardian of order and stability. This pattern is starkly evident in Burma under U Nu's leadership from 1948 to 1962. His government's controversial efforts to position the country as a Buddhist state ignited separatist movements and escalated ethnic tensions. When violence spiralled out of control, the military intervened, forming a caretaker government in 1958 and eventually supplanting the democratic regime in 1962. A similar scenario unfolded in Thailand between 1932 and 1938, where the democratic government grappled with issues of credibility, compounded by allegations of communist leanings and rampant corruption. The military's role became increasingly prominent, initially defending the government during the 1933 Borowadet revolution and ultimately seizing power in 1938. These instances clearly illustrate how leadership failures in the democratic systems paved the way for military intervention, casting a shadow over the effectiveness of democracy in maintaining political stability in the region.

Nonetheless, democracy experienced more success when there was adequate preparatory groundwork laid by colonial powers. In countries like Malaysia and the Philippines, the enduring nature of their democratic systems can be attributed to the methodical transition

overseen by their respective colonial rulers. Malaysia's smooth transition of power from British rule culminated in the formation of the Merdeka constitution, a well-crafted document that delineated legislative and executive powers with precision. Crucially, the inclusion of Article 153, which addressed the economic and social rights of the Chinese and Malay populations, was pivotal in maintaining the equilibrium of Malaysia's democratic fabric. In the Philippines, the United States played a seminal role in shaping the country's democratic trajectory through the 1934 Tydings-McDuffie Act. This legislation laid the foundation for a US-style presidential democracy, paving the way for a seamless transition to self-governance post-1946, which lasted until the imposition of martial law in 1972. These instances underscore how strategic and thoughtful preparation by colonial powers significantly contributed to the longevity and stability of democratic systems in Southeast Asia.

However, the success of democracy in such cases was largely due to the adoption of authoritarian measures. In Singapore, for instance, while free elections were a norm, the government's use of the Internal Security Act to detain political opponents without trial was a key authoritarian tactic. This approach effectively curtailed opposition, ensuring electoral dominance for the ruling party, as starkly illustrated by the arrest of left-wing activists during Operation Cold Store from 1976 to 1977. Similarly, in Indonesia, the post-1971 political landscape was rigidly controlled with only three permitted political parties, and dissenting voices were often silenced through imprisonment or worse. In these contexts, democracy paradoxically sustained its longevity not through the free and fair electoral processes typically associated with democratic systems but through authoritarian practices that manipulated and steered electoral outcomes.

In conclusion, the foundational absence of political tutelage, coupled with a series of ineffective leadership, profoundly impeded the flourishing of democratic systems in the region. This vacuum often led to military interventions as democratic governments struggled to assert their credibility and maintain order. Nonetheless, instances where colonial powers laid the groundwork for democracy showed more promising outcomes. Crucially, however, the necessity to employ authoritarian measures for the success of democracy in these contexts underscores an inherent limitation in the effectiveness of democratic systems alone.

Examine the factors which led to the rise of the military in Southeast Asian states in the independence years.

In the years following independence, Southeast Asian states found themselves grappling with a formidable force that would significantly shape their political landscapes: the military. This essay dissects the factors that propelled the rise of military influence in Southeast Asian nations. To begin, it is crucial to establish a clear definition of what constitutes a "military government." A military can be deemed dominant when it wields substantial authority in political decision-making, often eclipsing the influence of civilian leaders. This dominance, had implications for the democratic aspirations of these nations. This essay will argue how the inherent weaknesses of democratic systems, the historical backdrop of decolonization, and the formidable organizational strength of the military vis-à-vis civilian governance coalesced to usher in an era of military governments. However, the presence of societal groups and middle-class influences, coupled with the military's inability to impose its will on politics, ultimately curtailed its dominance in the long-run. By the 1980s, the rise of societal forces and evolving political dynamics led to a shift away from military dominance.

One cannot underestimate the pivotal role that historical context and the military's involvement in the decolonization process played in the rise of military dominance. The Burmese and Indonesian militaries, born out of the crucible of World War II and at the forefront of their nations' nationalist movements, emerged with a unique historical legitimacy. These militaries were not only instrumental in the struggle for independence but also played central roles in shaping the very foundations of their respective nation-states. Consider, for instance, the Indonesian military's heroic efforts against the Dutch during the establishment of the Republic, including their unwavering resolve in the face of Dutch actions such as the notorious "Police Actions." Similarly, the Burmese BNA's contributions in aiding nationalist forces, first against the Japanese and later against the British, underscored their indispensable role in the fight for sovereignty. Against this backdrop, it becomes evident that these militaries were not just actors in history; they were architects, catalysts, and defenders of their nations' independence, imbuing them with unparalleled historical legitimacy that dwarfed the fledgling democracies struggling to take root. In this historical context, the rise of the military as a dominant force in Southeast Asian states during their independence years is a logical and compelling outcome.

Furthermore, the ascent of the military as a dominant force in Southeast Asian states can also be attributed to the glaring instability and weaknesses inherent in their constitutional governments, particularly during the early years of independence. These fledgling democratic governments found themselves ill-equipped to contend with the centrifugal forces of ethnic separatism and political turmoil, which frequently necessitated military intervention as a means of restoring stability. The military often perceived itself as the only bastion capable of effectively countering these destabilizing factors, including the looming spectre of Communism. For instance, in Burma, the internal fractures within the U Nu government, compounded by its inability to quell intra-party disunity and address the instability wrought by Communist forces, laid the groundwork for the military's appointment as the caretaker government. Similarly, in Thailand, the disunity among the elite and the constitutional government's weaknesses sowed instability within the state, culminating in a November 1947 military coup that unseated the democratic government. These instances underscore how the

inadequacies of democratic governance in the face of challenges compelled the military to step in, leading to its ascendancy in Southeast Asian states during the critical years of independence.

Moreover, ascendancy of military influence in the nascent post-independence Southeast Asian states can be substantially ascribed to the strategic reliance placed upon the military apparatus by the civilian governments of the time. In a bid to consolidate their own power, political leaders often extended invitations to the military to become involved in politics, creating a symbiotic relationship. For instance, U Nu's decision to invite the military to assume the role of caretaker government in 1958 exemplified this dynamic, as he sought to maintain stability and assert control. Similarly, Sukarno's deliberate co-optation of the military in various actions, including military campaigns against the Dutch in West Irian and the policy of *Konfrontasi*, showcased the intertwined nature of civilian and military authority in shaping the nation's destiny. These instances underscored the deliberate reliance on the military as a means of achieving political objectives, ultimately fuelling the rise of the military as a pivotal force in Southeast Asian states during their formative years of independence.

Another factor contributing to the rise of the military's influence in Southeast Asian states during the early years of decolonization was the absence of robust societal groups and a middle class that could effectively check the power of the military. In these nascent nations, such social elements were notably lacking, only emerging in force during the 1980s. This absence allowed the military to wield unchecked authority. However, as exemplified by Thailand, the military's adoption of increasingly democratic practices in the 1980s stands as a testament to the subsequent emergence of a middle class, which began to assert its influence as a counterbalance to military dominance. Similarly, in Indonesia, the rise of various societal groups, including religious organizations, NGOs, and the burgeoning middle class, collectively played a pivotal role in influencing the military's actions. Their concerted efforts ultimately culminated in the removal of Suharto from power. These examples underscore the transformative power of the emergence of societal groups and the middle class, serving as effective checks on the military's authority, and marking a significant shift in the political landscape of Southeast Asian states.

That said when there was structural subordination of the military to civilian government institutions, despite procedural influence, this prevented the ascendancy of the military. Unlike military-dominated regimes in countries like Burma and Thailand, where the Revolutionary Council and Senate wielded substantial political power, non-military regimes in these nations maintained a significant degree of subordination to civilian institutions, including constitutional arrangements and electoral processes. In Indonesia, for instance, Suharto effectively depoliticized ABRI after the 1965 coup, making the military dependent on him for positions in state enterprises and economic arrangements. Similarly, in the Philippines, the military's authority ultimately hinged on Marcos, who had the final say in matters of military expansion and budget allocation during martial law. Even in Thailand, where the military played a prominent role, it remained subordinate to the institution of the monarchy, as evidenced by General Suchinda's resignation in 1992 following the King's intervention in support of democratic forces. These examples underscore how the structural subordination of the military to civilian institutions prevented their unchecked rise to dominance.

Moreover, a pivotal factor that prevented the continued rise of the military's dominance states was the evolving dynamics of the political landscape, particularly evident by the 1980s. The military's ascendant role during the early years of independence was a response to the political

chaos and instability of the time. However, the subsequent emergence and strengthening of societal forces by the 1980s led to the erosion of the military's leading position. In the Philippines, the 1986 EDSA Revolution, driven by pressure from influential entities like the Church and the Manila business community, resulted in the installation of Aquino's democratic government, effectively sidelining the military. Thailand saw a similar shift in 1992 when student protests led to the exile of General Suchinda, marking a clear departure from military rule. Burma's 1988 and 8888 student protests paved the way for the May 1990 elections, won by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), although the results were eventually invalidated. These examples highlight the impact of societal forces, leading to the diminishing influence of the military and the restoration of civilian authority by the 1980s.

Finally, another factor that curtailed the military's ascent to political dominance was its inability to effectively impose its will on politics. This demonstrated that the military's leading role had waned by this time. In the Philippines, for instance, a series of seven failed military coups against President Aquino between 1987 and 1989 underscored the military's inability to assert control over the political landscape. Similarly, in Thailand, there were unsuccessful coup attempts against General Prem's semi-democratic government in 1981 and 1985, as well as the failure of General Arthit's endeavour to amend the Constitution in 1983. These instances serve as evidence of the military's diminishing capacity to dictate outcomes, signifying a significant shift away from military dominance in the post-1980s era.

In conclusion, the rise of the military in Southeast Asian states during the early years of independence was shaped by various interrelated factors. The historical context of decolonization, marked by the role played by military forces in the struggle for independence, bestowed upon them a unique historical legitimacy over the nascent nation-states. Furthermore, the weaknesses of democratic governments in dealing with internal divisions often compelled political leaders to depend on the military as a means of maintaining stability and consolidating power. However, the presence of societal groups and middle-class influences, coupled with the military's inability to impose its will on politics, ultimately curtailed its dominance in the long-run. By the 1980s, the rise of societal forces and evolving political dynamics led to a significant shift away from military dominance in several Southeast Asian nations.

Assess the significance of the Cold War on the domestic stability of the independent Southeast Asian states.

The Cold War had a multifaceted impact on the domestic stability of independent Southeast Asian states. While it brought stability to some nations, such as Thailand and Indonesia, through economic and military aid, it also precipitated instability in others, notably Vietnam. However, to fully assess the Cold War's impact, one must consider the pivotal role of national leadership. The actions and decisions of local leaders were often the most significant factors in achieving domestic stability. These leaders navigated the complex Cold War dynamics, managing internal centrifugal threats and adeptly manipulating political structures to maintain or restore stability. Therefore, while the Cold War undeniably influenced Southeast Asia's domestic stability, it was the strategic responses of the region's leaders to these global tensions that ultimately determined the course and nature of stability within their respective states.

The Cold War context significantly influenced political stability in Southeast Asia, as the region became embroiled in Cold War struggles due to the presence of Communist insurgencies, notably the Vietnam War. Fearing the destabilizing effects of Communism, the United States offered support for maximum government in countries like Thailand, viewing them as a crucial bulwark against Communist expansion. This support was tangible, as evidenced by the substantial military aid provided to Thailand, amounting to \$222 million between 1951 and 1957, which enabled the modernization and training of its armed forces. Furthermore, the US military utilized Thailand as a base for its troops and aircraft from the mid-1960s onwards, necessitating upgrades to Thai military facilities. In addition to these indirect roles, the Thai military directly participated in the Indochina conflict, with over 11,000 troops in Vietnam assisting American efforts by 1969. Moreover, it conducted independent operations in Laos. The Cold War, therefore, not only heightened concerns over Communist influence in Southeast Asia but also played a pivotal role in reinforcing the military's significance and influence in the region, as it became a key player in the broader geopolitical struggle of the era.

While it is true that the Cold War did provide political stability in certain Southeast Asian states, it is essential to acknowledge that it also contributed significantly to instability in others, such as Vietnam. The U.S.'s involvement and choice to support leaders like Ngo Dinh Diem had a destabilizing impact on the country. Diem's policies and actions further exacerbated the internal turmoil. Although the U.S. aimed to democratize politics in South Vietnam after Diem's tenure, the contextual challenges were formidable. The emergence of numerous political parties in 1963 and their proliferation by the end of 1969 was a step towards democracy. However, South Vietnam lacked a history of democratic traditions, resulting in these parties often being built on personal connections and loyalties rather than strong ideological foundations. Consequently, attempts at democratic reforms faced limitations. Leaders like Thieu maintained their grip on power by placing allies in key positions and manipulating elections, as evidenced by his 1971 re-election with an implausible 94% of the vote. Ultimately, in 1973, as American forces prepared to withdraw from Vietnam, Thieu abandoned the democratic experiment by establishing his own "Democratic Party," which bore resemblance to Leninist-style parties and required all civil servants to join, mirroring the North Vietnamese Lao Dong model. In this context, the notion of democracy in South Vietnam was undeniably challenged by both external and internal factors.

Hence, it must be noted that the presence of the Cold War was merely a contributing factor towards domestic stability, but that the role of leaders was the most significant aspect that gave rise to domestic stability, as their actions have served to enable them to deal with centrifugal threats within the country, as well as their abilities to make use of modified political structures to provide the conditions for stability within Southeast Asian States.

The personal characteristics and political styles of political leaders played an indispensable role in shaping political stability in Southeast Asian states, laying the foundation for robust and enduring political structures. An example is Singapore's iconic leader, Lee Kuan Yew, who masterfully employed a combination of "soft" and "hard" control methods to forge a stable state. Lee's unwavering control over the People's Action Party (PAP) minimized internal dissent, predominantly stemming from differences between the "Old Guard" and Lee over the pace of political change. His adept management allowed him to sideline dissenting voices like Toh Chin Chye, Ong Pang Boon, and Lee Khoo Choy, who resisted retirement and expressed concerns about the party's alignment with the majority Chinese and dialect-speaking population. Additionally, Lee institutionalized political control through mechanisms such as the elected Presidency, the subordination of the military, depoliticization strategies, an emphasis on economic development, state-regulated media, and the utilization of the Internal Security Act, among others. Similarly, Suharto's leadership in Indonesia showcased the critical role of personal characteristics and political strategies in fostering stability. Suharto effectively integrated the military into the government and depoliticized society through a vigorous economic development agenda, thus remedying Indonesia's historical instability. His early actions, following the PKI coup, involved purging suspected leftists from the military ranks and placing loyalists in key positions. Centralizing the military's command structure under the Ministry of Defence, temporarily under his control, further consolidated his authority. Suharto also skilfully fomented factionalism within the military, establishing civil and military intelligence units to maintain surveillance and sow distrust among potential adversaries. His ability to discipline high-ranking military officers who deviated from his directives exemplified his mastery over the armed forces.

That said presence of weak leaders can undeniably precipitate political instability within a state, as illustrated by the case of Ferdinand Marcos. Marcos struggled to effectively manage the diverse political factions within his government, a deficiency that ultimately led to his downfall. In stark contrast, Suharto skilfully prevented elite factionalism from spiralling out of control, while the Burmese military government notably maintained unity within its ranks. However, the primary source of opposition to the Marcos regime stemmed from the political elite he had sought to marginalize, a feat in which he proved far less adept than Suharto. Political scientist William Case emphasizes this distinction, highlighting that Suharto adeptly managed the elite collectively, balancing factions, whereas Marcos disunified and alienated many elites, simultaneously undermining some factions and cultivating new cronies. Elite opposition took various forms, encompassing disenchanted business elites like Eduardo Olaguer, who initiated the "Light-a-Fire Movement" to target the properties of Marcos' cronies, disgruntled military officers exemplified by the Reform the Armed Forces Movement (RAM), and politicians such as Benigno Aquino and Salvador Laurel, who formed opposition parties. Additionally, the Catholic Church, led by Cardinal Jaime Sin, played a crucial role by condemning the government's handling of socio-economic issues and resisting its campaign against the church's freedom to address matters of Catholic morality. Marcos's inability to

effectively manage these elite opposition forces exacerbated the political instability that ultimately brought about his downfall.

The role of constitutional processes and elections in the maintenance of long-term political stability and leadership transition is another critical aspect. In the case of Singapore, parliamentary elections have been consistently held since 1965, with the People's Action Party (PAP) consistently winning and maintaining a strong grip on power, often securing over 61% of the popular vote. While the opposition managed to make inroads, such as the Workers' Party's victory in Anson in 1981 and subsequent wins in various constituencies and seats, the electoral system in Singapore has, over time, served to strengthen the ruling party rather than facilitate free and fair competition. The introduction of Group Representation Constituencies in 1988, ostensibly to ensure ethnic minority representation, has hindered the opposition, as only the PAP possesses the resources to contend in these larger constituencies. This system has also enabled gerrymandering, further consolidating the PAP's advantage. Similarly, in Malaysia post-1969, the electoral landscape was characterized by the reconstitution of the Alliance into the Barisan Nasional (BN) in 1974, a move that disadvantaged parties like the Democratic Action Party that remained outside the BN. The BN also employed gerrymandering and exclusionary tactics, such as disqualifying opposition candidates on minor technical grounds, to maintain electoral dominance, ultimately resulting in less fair electoral system despite regular elections. These practices contributed to the BN's consistent electoral victories, allowing UMNO to amend the constitution and curtail civil and political freedoms with its two-thirds parliamentary majority. Thus, while constitutional processes and elections are essential components of political stability, their impact varied significantly depending on how they are utilized.

The ability of governments to effectively address various threats and challenges, whether they are centrifugal forces in the early period or popular opposition in the later period, has been pivotal in shaping the development of political stability. An illustration of this dynamic can be found in Burma, where the military's historical role in resisting colonial powers, combating ethnic separatists, and maintaining internal order contributed significantly to its legitimacy. Nevertheless, as in many regimes characterized by centralized control, political opposition emerged to challenge the regime's legitimacy, highlighting the tension between traditional culture and democratic values. In the case of Singapore, elections have paradoxically served to consolidate the ruling party's dominance rather than promote free and fair competition. The introduction of Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) and gerrymandering have hindered the opposition's prospects, coupled with the People's Action Party's effective maintenance of internal unity. While schemes like the Non-Constituency MP introduced in 1984 and the Nominated MP scheme introduced in 1991 ostensibly offered a semblance of opposition representation, they also served to pacify the electorate and co-opt potential sources of opposition. This underscores how responses to political challenges and popular opposition can both bolster and undermine political stability, contingent upon the strategies employed by those in power.

In conclusion, the Cold War, while offering crucial stability through economic and military aid in countries like Thailand and Indonesia, also paradoxically fuelled domestic instability in nations like Vietnam. However, it is imperative to recognize that the Cold War's influence was but one contributing factor to domestic stability. The paramount aspect that fostered stability was the leadership of these states. Leaders played a pivotal role in addressing internal

centrifugal threats and adapting political structures to establish stable conditions in Southeast Asian states. To achieve enduring political stability, leaders and states had to demonstrate a proficiency in harnessing democratic processes and institutions, ensuring long-term stability, and facilitating seamless leadership transitions and power sharing. In essence, while external factors like the Cold War had their impact, it was the vision and actions of leaders that truly defined the course of domestic stability in these Southeast Asian nations.

Were maximum governments effective in establishing and maintaining political stability in Southeast Asia in the post-colonial period?

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