The Political Economy of New Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past years, the deterioration of democracy and the rise of authoritarian forms of governance have been a growing global phenomenon. In the Global North, this became painfully clear not least since the establishment of right-wing governments in Hungary and Poland, or the election victory of Donald Trump in November 2016. Southeast Asia is certainly no exception to this trend (Chacko & Jayasuriya, 2018; Docena, 2018; Kurlantzick, 2014). With General Prayuth Chan-o-cha in Thailand (2014) and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines (2016), two more 'strongmen' joined the ranks of authoritarian leaders in a region that is departing fast from democratic pathways. They follow a law and order attitude reflected in statements such as that of General Prayuth who warned of "obsession with rights" which could "lead to anarchy" ("Obsession With rights", 2017). Duterte's central message is that the Philippines suffer from elites who care too much about Western notions of human rights and Western democracy (Bello, this volume; Focus on the Global South, 2017; Juego, 2017). Several recent surveys confirm the authoritarian trend in Southeast Asia. The Democracy Index 2017, for example, listed six out of ten nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) as *unfree*, two (Indonesia and Malaysia) as *largely free* and only Timor-Leste as *partly free* (Brunei not included). None of the countries was considered as *fully free* (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2018).

Meanwhile, research on *new authoritarianism* has emerged as a dynamic field in different disciplinary and regional epistemic communities. Due to the global scope of the issue, its political relevance and its highly contested nature, emerging debates are very vibrant, and yet fragmented. This fragmentation is mirrored, firstly, in the variety of concepts which are being used – the most prominent being authoritarianism, populism, and fascism – sometimes in combinations or with specifying adjectives (authoritarian populism, populist authoritarianism, right-wing populism, right-wing authoritarianism, authoritarian neo-liberalism, etc.). For this special issue, we will use new authoritarianism as an umbrella term – in singular, without suggesting that it denotes a single well-defined homogeneous concept or regime type (for a different approach see Docena, 2018). Secondly, the dynamism and fragmentation of the debate on new authoritarianism is mirrored in the highly controversial debate about the actors and the social

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base of the turn towards the new authoritarianism (Demirović, Sablowski, Schneider, & Syrovatka, 2018). Thirdly, there seem to be fundamentally differing views on how to conceptualize the link between authoritarianism, neoliberal capitalism, and the economic crisis. On the one hand, there seems to be an emerging consensus that the rise of a new authoritarianism is linked to what has been analyzed as a multiple crisis which started in 2008. Yet, it is highly controversial in how far the new authoritarianism marks the ascent of a nationalist, protectionist – thus anti-neo-liberal – mode of regulation, or rather is connected to a further intensification and continuation of the neo-liberal economic policies (Bruff, 2014; Demirović, 2018).

This special issue contributes to the emerging debate and addresses different phenomena of new authoritarianism in the Southeast Asian region from a political economy perspective. We argue for the need to understand new authoritarianism as connected to the crisis of global neoliberal capitalism and as part of a global trend. In all areas of the discussion, the role of China as a new hegemonic power plays a central role. Against this backdrop, data from Southeast Asia – where Chinese economic, political, and cultural influence is particularly strong – promises new insights and valuable contribution to the general debate.

FROM DEMOCRATIC 'POSTER CHILD' TO AUTHORITARIAN 'PROBLEM REGION'

Not long ago, in the early 2000s, hope for democratic progress in the region was still high (Freedom House, 2005).[1] Globally, the number of democratic countries had increased since the 1970s in a steady process described as "the third wave of democratization" (Huntington, 1991) and spread to Asia in the 1990s (Croissant, 2016). At the end of the cold war, Fukuyama famously declared the "end of history" and the eternal victory of liberal democracy over communism (Fukuyama, 1992). The extraordinary economic growth in the New Tiger States (Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines) appeared to create the conditions for democratic reforms as suggested by modernization theory (Lipset, 1960). With increasing income levels, an educated urban middle class was growing, championed as the 'bearer of democracy'. Indeed, following the early years of the economic boom, mass movements dominated by middle class replaced the old authoritarian regimes one by one. It started with the overthrow of the Marcos regime in the Philippines by the *People Power* Revolution in 1992 (Thompson, 2011). In the same year in Thailand, the *Mobile Mob* mass protests led to the toppling of General Suchinda and the legendary intervention of King Bhumipol (McCargo, 1997). Subsequently, democracy in Thailand appeared to consolidate with the 1997 constitution. In Indonesia, the *Reformasi* movement overthrew General Suharto in the wake of the economic crisis of 1997; and in Malaysia Anwar Ibrahim challenged his former superior Mahathir (Funston, 2000).

However, when the 'third wave' reached its democratic peak in the mid-2000s, progress began to stall or even reverse quickly (Croissant, 2016). In Thailand, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, during his first term in office, had gradually turned into an authoritarian populist (Pasuk & Baker, 2011), cracking down on political dissent, waging a bloody "war on drugs" (which Duterte would copy ten years later), and

1 In its 2005 report, Freedom House categorizes the majority of ASEAN nations as *partly free* or *free*.

stirring up an insurgency in Thailand's south. Yet, after he was re-elected in 2005, the military staged a coup in 2006 and yet again in 2014, re-installing a military dictatorship that has lasted for already five years.[2] In Cambodia, the iron grip of quasi-dictator Hun Sen destroyed any hopes for a democratic government to rise out of the ashes of civil war, with the support of the UN (Hutt, 2017). In Laos in 2012, the (enforced) disappearance of civil society leader Sombath Somphone ended any illusions of a political opening (Fuller, 2013). In addition, Myanmar, the most recent candidate for a democratic transition, has disappointed international observers. Even after the take-over of the civilian government, led by the National League for Democracy (NLD), in many respects authoritarian politics did not recede, raising questions concerning an "authoritarian rollback" (Buschmann, 2017). In particular, the crisis around the violent displacement of roughly 700,000 Rohingya led to an international outcry and condemnation of the former democratic icon Aung San Suu Kyi for not preventing what has been called an "ethnic cleansing" (Beyrer & Adeeba, 2017).

Hence, at ASEANs 50th anniversary - celebrated in 2017 - the political outlook for the region was rather bleak. Since the 2007 ASEAN Charter, a number of reforms have been initiated; in particular, the neoliberal reform agenda of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) (Juego, 2014). Other "principles of the Charter, however, have not been adequately implemented. That's particularly true when it comes to issues concerning human rights, democracy, fundamental freedoms, good governance, and the rule of law" (Khoo Ying Hooi, 2017, for a different perspective see Middleton & Pritchart, 2013). The widespread assumption that increased economic growth would lead to an increased level of political freedom proved wrong over the long run. In addition, the role of the middle-class is controversial, with the urban middle classes in Thailand supporting fascist-like, popular, anti-democracy movements (Naruemon & McCargo, 2016; Schaffar, 2016, 2018), and middle classes in the Philippines approving extrajudicial killings of so called 'drug users' by a populist full of disdain for human rights (Focus on the Global South, 2017). The question remains how this trend of stalled or even reversed democratization can be conceived of, and what makes this region unique compared to global trends?

TOWARDS AN EXPLANATION OF THE RISE OF AUTHORITARIANISM

The emerging debate on new authoritarianism is dynamic as well as fragmented. This is true for the global discourse as well as for the debate on and in SEA. To lay the foundation for our contribution, some remarks on the history and definition of central concepts and terms are due. What we subsume under new authoritarianism can be discussed on different conceptual levels: on the level of *regimes*, of *actors,* and of *ideology*.

Regimes

The term authoritarianism in the sense of a regime type was established by Linz (1975). Similar to the tripartite regime typology of Aristotle or the Weberian tripartite

2 Thaksin was the first Prime Minister in the history of Thailand ever re-elected to serve a second term. For an analysis of the political polarization, see Naruemon (2016).

typology based on the criterion of legitimacy, Linz uses the criterion of pluralism and contrasts authoritarianism (with limited pluralism) with democracy (unlimited pluralism) and totalitarianism (no pluralism/complete conformity). Authoritarianism, according to Linz, is a regime type where traditional institutions, like the family, church, or corporatist organizations, are used for the exertion of dictatorial rule.

Whereas Linz conceptualizes authoritarianism as fundamentally different from democracy, critical materialist approaches see authoritarianism as an inherent feature to bourgeois democracy. Poulantzas (1978/2000) analyzed rising authoritarian tendencies in the democratically consolidated welfare states of the 1970s and coined the concept of *authoritarian statism* (Kannankulam, 2009, p. 223-224). On a descriptive level, Poulantzas' work shows parallels to the characterization of Linz' typology. Nevertheless, he is writing from the perspective of critical state theory and analyzes the authoritarian tendencies as result of the economic crisis, which began with the oil crisis in 1973 and put Western democracies under pressure. These ideas have recently been taken up by Lukas Oberndorfer in his concept of *authoritarian constitutionalism* (Kannankulam, 2016; Oberndorfer, 2013) – a specific strategy of the EU to enshrine neoliberal policies of austerity in quasi constitutional treaties on the EU level, and defend them by means of increasing suppressive measures.[3]

Populism

Populism is one of the most frequently used categories in the current discourse on the rise of new authoritarianism. Roughly speaking it denotes a situation where a "rhetorically versed leader" appeals to or "seduces the dull populace" by means of "false promises" (Boos, 2018, p. 10). Because of its analytical vagueness, and the strong tendency to be used as political slogan, there have been frequent appeals to abandon the concept.[4] A second quite different strand of the debate on populism stems from Latin America, where leaders in the early and mid-20th century achieved a substantial improvement of the situation of the marginalized parts of the population through social reforms.[5] The special feature shared by these presidents, which owed them the characterization as populists, was that they mobilized the electorate by emotionally appealing language. For Southeast Asia, the term was taken up by Mizuno and Pasuk (2009) and recently by Hadiz and Robison (2017), and Hewison (2017), largely drawing on the structural functionalist tradition and a pejorative meaning.

3 Very similar, but including a focus of the electoral dynamism inside the nation states, Alex Demirović (2018) speaks of authoritarian populism. Docena (2017) speaks of authoritarian populism in connection with Duterte.

4 The current exponential use of the concept is, according to Boos (2018), more an expression of the lack of concepts on the side of the Left, and should be analyzed as a phenomenon of its own. Boos identifies two major historic sources of the concept of populism: One source is the Russian Narodniki – the movement of "going to the people" of young Russian intellectuals -and the US-American People's Party in the late 19th century.

5 Those leaders included Lázaro Cardenas (Mexico), Getúlio Vargas (Brazil), and Juan Domingo Perón (Argentina).

Fascism

Similar to authoritarianism of populism, fascism is not clearly defined and has a strong undertone of a political slogan. The term fascism is derived from a term for Italian vigilante groups – (*Fasci Italiani di Combattimento* or FIC) – which were supported by the capitalists in northern Italy, with the aim of fighting the increasing influence of organized labor and communist groups in factories and among rural laborers. Under Mussolini's leadership, these vigilante groups grew strong enough to abolish the parliamentarian system and establish an authoritarian regime based on violence. Theories focusing on the dynamism of class struggle and the role of political violence in the early stages of the rise of fascism (Saage, 2007) have recently been used by Bello (2018) for a cross-regional and diachronic comparative analysis of regimes in Italy, Chile, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines. Schaffar (2016) and Schaffar & Naruemon (in print) focus on vigilante actors in the social media as a form of fascist groups and follow a similar interpretation of the situation of present day Thailand.

Ideology

All authoritarian regime types discussed here – authoritarianism, populism, fascism – primarily denote a mode of governance. However, in the discourses centering around the respective concepts we find literature that can be characterized as an "ideational approach", trying to carve out a specific ideological content connected to the respective concepts. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017, p. 6) define populism as a "thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people". Fascism, on the other hand, is understood as a political ideology whose mythic core is a palingenetic (meaning the idea of 'national rebirth') form of populist ultra-nationalism (Griffin, 2003).

Certainly, the recent developments in Southeast Asia provide an abundance of data which can be analyzed along these lines: Xenophobic discourses, anti-liberal ideas, the legitimization of the use of violence, the de-humanization of refugees, the anti-gender discourses, the rising LGBTIQ-phobia. In a comparative perspective, however, it seems that the present authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia do not share a common ideology: Thailand with its hyper-monarchy, the Philippines with its preoccupation with drug abuse, or Indonesia with its dynamics connected to Islamic fundamentalism. What unites the new authoritarian leaders, and what might count as a distinctive feature for the entire Southeast Asian region, however, is the recurrence of the Asian Values debate.

Values debate

The idea of 'Asian Values' was popularized in the 1990s by autocrats such as Mahathir and Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew (Thompson, 2001). They claimed that Asian values based on Confucianism – with a supposed focus on loyalty towards the family and community – were simply not compatible with the concept of 'Western democracy'

emphasizing individual freedom. This argument has been somewhat revived at times also in the context of Thailand, referring to 'Thai Style' democracy (Ferrara, 2010; Thompson, 2015; Walker, 2006). Yet, several surveys suggest that preferences for authoritarian politics are certainly not limited to (Southeast) Asia. Also in 'settled' Western democracies, an increased support for authoritarian populists led to the rise of right-wing parties for instance in Austria, Switzerland, Netherlands, Denmark, Hungary amongst others. Different from the Asian values debate, the tendency towards authoritarianism has been explained by some as a "cultural backlash in Western societies against long-term, ongoing social change" and increasing liberalization (Norris, 2016).

Actors

After looking at regimes and ideologies, a third dimension of new authoritarianism needs to be considered. Who are the actors behind the new development? Who profits from it? How can we analyze the social base of new authoritarian regimes?

Concerning these questions, a highly controversial debate has evolved in the United States and in Europe, at the example of the rise of Trump or what has been called authoritarian populism in Europe (Demirović, 2018; Eversberg, 2018; Lessenich, 2016; Sablowski & Thien, 2018). The two contradictory and seemingly irreconcilable views are: On the one hand – the analysis that the social base is mainly working-class people, who are the losers of neoliberal globalization and have been abandoned by the social democratic parties (Demirović, 2018; Sablowski & Thien 2018).[6] On the other hand, Lessenich (2016) and Eversberg (2018) focus on the role of middle-classes and their chauvinistic motivation to defend their social status. This line of argumentation can also be found in Southeast Asia. Saxer (2014), for instance understands the "rage of the middle class" in Thailand as a fight between elites during a transformation crisis. In this case, conservative elites resort to fascist ideologies (Schaffar, 2016) to gain legitimacy, and apply extra-constitutional measures to turn back the re-distributive project of Thaksin's populism. Bello (2018) too, sees a crucial and ambivalent role of the middle-class in the dialectic of "revolution–counterrevolution" against a perceived revolutionary threat by a "progressive movement that is able to use the law and established institutions to promote social reform" (p. 34).[7]

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF NEW AUTHORITARIANISM

The authors in this issue take a political economic perspective in order to understand the rise of authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia as well as globally. This distinguishes the present special issue from analyses cited earlier, which rely on a modular approach to democracy (Croissant, 2016), treat the political system as largely detached from the surrounding economic situation, and identify authoritarianism as an endogenous dysfunction of the political system. The approach pursued here departs

6 Walden Bello's (2018) analysis of the rise of Duterte mirrors this view, too.

7 Due to space limitations, we will throw only a spotlight on open questions in this field in the Research Workshop section of this issue (Schaffar).

from the parallel nature of the phenomenon at this critical juncture of late capitalism, as there seems to be an intrinsic connection to the crisis of capitalism. Already decades before the financial crisis of 2008, Poulantzas (1978/2000) developed the concept of authoritarian statism, which seems strikingly contemporary. This concept explains how states try to manage economic growth under crisis tendencies resulting in "intensified state control over every sphere of socio-economic life combined with radical decline of the institutions of political democracy and with draconian and multiform, curtailment of so-called 'formal' liberties" (Poulantzas, 1978/2000, pp. 203-204). While the concept focused on western capitalist states, it is also applied to dependent states in the periphery (Chacko & Jayasuriya, 2018; Jayasuriya, 2018). Even though it displays certain fascist elements, according to Poulantzas authoritarian statism does not equal the historic form of fascism. As a result of the 'crisis of crisis management', producing increasing unemployment, inequality and social tensions, authoritarian states increasingly resort to nationalist ideologies, sometimes combined with religious elements to manufacture hegemony and support for its neoliberal re-structuring (Demirović, 2018; Docena, 2017).

The connection between the economic crisis and the rise of authoritarianism seems well established. What is contested, though, is the question whether there is a specific kind of economic project underlying the new authoritarian regimes. One line of argumentation – following Poulantzas – is that new authoritarian regimes mean a further intensification of neoliberalism. Another position claims that the new regimes pursue an anti-neoliberal project – most clearly mirrored by the new mercantilist 'XY first' economic policies – and in non-Western countries a move to abandon western style neo-liberal globalization.

This is where the role of China comes into play. China itself has undergone a massive capitalist transformation over the past decades, arguably rescuing global capitalism from the crisis of Fordism following the 1970s (Harvey, 2005; Neuwirth, 2018). Yet as China's own capital accumulation cycle is experiencing a decline, it set out to plan a massive infrastructure investment program abroad as a way of "spatial fix" to its overaccumulation problems (Harvey, 2001; Zhang, 2017). Following its 'going out' strategy at the turn of the millennium, China soon became the largest investor in the Southeast Asia Region. In 2013, it announced its massive *One Belt One Road Initiative* (OBOR), also known as *Belt-and-Road Initiative* (BRI). With an investment volume of several trillion USD, supported by the BRICS Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) (Chen & Mardeusz, 2015), the plan involves massive infrastructure development (including harbors, ports, highways, railways, etc.). Eventually, it should cover over 60% of the world population, potentially overshadowing the US Marshall Plan. The strategy is to export capital and labor and integrate as many countries as possible into its economic and political sphere, thus replacing the *Washington Consensus* with the *Beijing Consensus* and diminishing US strategic influence in the region. While US imperialism has used free trade agreements and (forced) market liberalization as a means to extend its political influence (Harvey, 2001), China is building connections through infrastructure development. Thereby a heavy debt creates a dependence or debt bondage which some have called "creditor imperialism" (Chellaney, 2017).

According to Kneuer and Demmelhuber (2016), China can be regarded as one of the world's new "authoritarian gravity centers" which may serve as a role model "for

the countries in their geopolitical proximity, making emulation, learning processes or policy transfers effective means of autocracy promotion" (p. 777). While China may not actively promote authoritarian regimes, it is at least providing indirect support through its economic engagement with authoritarian regimes. This might also result from China's quest for stability in the countries, which are the destination of large-scale investment. The political consequences can be observed for instance in Cambodia where longtime prime minister Hun Sen, relying on China's full support, openly repudiated Cambodia's former Western sponsors by dissolving the main opposition party and closing down an independent US-American-owned newspaper (Hutt, 2017).

In his case study, Einzenberger (this issue) discusses the politics of dispossession around a planned Chinese mining project in Myanmar's frontier at the beginning of the political transition in 2011. The study constitutes a showcase of the influence of China – mediated through Chinese companies and investment – on political processes in the neighboring countries, resulting in (de-)democratization processes and counter-movements. Myanmar is well known for its dependence on China, which enabled the authoritarian military regime's survival, also in times of international sanctions. Rich in resources and sharing a long border, the country is considered by China as a resource frontier to be integrated into its economic orbit in order to fuel its economic growth. Due to the regime of dispossession described in the article as *frontier capitalism*, in the early years of the political transition there was a considerable increase of anti-dispossession movements. While reconciliation with the US and Europe opened up some political space for civil society to contest dispossession, in recent years, Myanmar has re-oriented itself again towards China, in particular due to its worsening diplomatic ties with Europe and the US in relation to the 'Rohingya crisis'. Interestingly, while the Rohingya have been scapegoated as an economic and political threat, millions of Chinese immigrants in the countries' north, de-facto dominating the economy, have been left out of the public discourse.

Looking at the case of Thailand, Schaffar in his article discusses another example of how de-democratization processes can be linked to the impact of Chinese projects. His approach, however, focuses on a macro-level and on different actors at a national level. He argues, that the high-speed railway project proposed in 2013 – connecting Thailand via Laos to China as part of Chinas Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI) – played an important role in intra-elite conflicts leading up to the 2014 coup. Taking a longue durée perspective, and drawing on world-systems theory, he interprets the Chinese mega-infrastructure projects as the material backbone of what André Gunder Frank (1996) called the "ReOrientation" of the world economy towards China. Against this background, the coup d'état in Thailand appears as an example of the upheavals in the phase of transition between two accumulation cycles.

Bonn Juego's article adds to the discussion in how far the new authoritarianism in Southeast Asia is new and linked to a specific new economic project (such as Chinese investment or the Chinese BRI). His very topical article departs from the recent historic elections in Malaysia where the longtime opposition Pakatan Harapan defeated the Barisan Nasional, which had ruled the country since its independence in 1957. Yet, this likewise marked the return to power of Mahathir Mohamad, one of modern Asia's notorious strongmen and leading proponent of the concept of Asian Values.

The new ruling government under Mahathir promises regime change through institutional reforms, the revival of populist economic policies, and the investigation of massive corruption allegations against the nine-year tenure of former premier Najib Razak – including the review of lucrative megaproject deals with China's government and corporations under the BRI framework. Juego concretely discusses the institutions of the prevailing regime where the promised reforms shall start and where change must come. Through a critical assessment of the evolving political economy of development from Mahathir's first stint as prime minister in the 1980s/1990s to the administrations of Abdullah Badawi and Najib at the turn of the 21st century, Juego reveals the continuity and progression of what he calls the regime of "authoritarian neoliberalism", or a neoliberal economy embedded in authoritarian politics in contemporary Malaysia.

Middleton, in his contribution, focuses directly on the nexus between economy and authoritarianism and discusses the dynamics of transnational business activities and human rights violations in the region. His analysis sheds light on economic actors from Thailand and Malaysia and on a transnational aspect of the work of human rights commissions in these countries. Drawing on the concept of 'extraterritorial obligations' (ETOs) – duties of states towards protecting human rights beyond borders (ETO Consortium 2013) – he argues that appropriately mandated National Human Rights Institutions and an active civil society empowered with political and civil freedoms are necessary for the further institutionalization and effective utilization of ETOs in the region. He shows this dynamism on the example of two dams under construction on the Mekong River's mainstream, namely the Xayaburi Dam in Northern Laos and the Don Sahong Dam in Southern Laos, and the role of the Thai and Malaysia national human rights commissions.

The four articles in this issue focus on different aspects of the authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia and their connection to economic regulation and crises. They illustrate facets of persistent neoliberalism, but also the contrary – the dawn of a new accumulation cycle of world history. They reveal transnational mechanisms of primitive accumulation as well as sophisticated transnational institutionalization processes for the defense of human rights. There is no coherent picture or answer to the question whether the new authoritarian regimes are connected with a specific economic project or a regional flavor. However, what becomes clear is that any response to the rather bleak outlook can only be transnational cooperation in the search for more fundamental alternatives.

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