GLOBAL SNAPSHOTS

Issues Transcending Regional Boundaries:

Southeast Asia and ASEAN

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April 2016

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Southeast Asian and ASEAN Studies

http://seas.indiana.edu/ | seas@indiana.edu
1. **ASEAN is in Southeast Asia, but not all Southeast Asia is in ASEAN.** The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was founded in 1967 with the signing of the ASEAN Declaration (also known as the Bangkok Declaration). ASEAN in 1967 included Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore. Since then, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar (Burma), and Cambodia have joined the ranks. Currently, only East Timor and the various island sovereignties are not included in ASEAN.

2. **Southeast Asia and ASEAN share land borders with India, China, Bangaldesh, Papua New Guinea and maritime borders with Australia.** These important borders factor into the geopolitical workings of the Southeast Asian countries.

3. **ASEAN is modeled after the UN.** Its goals include: economic acceleration, promotion of regional peace, administrative and research assistance, collaboration on both agricultural and industrial growth, and a promotion of trade.

4. **The region of Southeast Asia is experiencing a significant increase in population.** The total population of Southeast Asia in 2010 was 593 million, give or take as many as 10 million. The changing population of Southeast Asia is a topic that should fascinate because of the diversity of situations, and population dynamics are intimately involved in the issues of development planning.

5. **ASEAN is an emerging economic power horse.** Together, the ten ASEAN countries have a combined GDP of 2.4 trillion in 2013, making it one of the largest economic zones in the world (Vinayak, Thompson, & Tonby, 2014).

6. **Southeast Asia is home to cultural and ethnic diversity with a rich history.** In terms of religion, the majority of the population in Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar is Buddhist; the majority in Brunei, Indonesia, and Malaysia is Muslim; the majority in the Philippines is Catholic; in Vietnam, the population practices folk beliefs or remain non-religious; and Singapore has a diversity religious beliefs. Historically, all ASEAN countries were colonized by Western countries except Thailand, which has never been colonized.

7. **Independence movements in Southeast Asian countries marked the end of colonization in the region.** After World War II, Western countries wanted to maintain the status quo of the region prior to the war, ruled by the colonial governments. However, the return of the colonial rulers faced resistance from the people, and these independence movements brought about great political changes.

8. **During the Cold War, Southeast Asia became the real battleground, culminating in the Vietnam War.** The rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union and the Communist China escalated in Vietnam, where the US military got involved in the war to support the South Vietnam government.

9. **Territory and maritime disputes in the South China Sea has drawn tension between China and some Southeast Asian countries.** The rise of China’s military activities has drawn concern from the US and China’s neighboring countries, including Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, who have claimed sovereignty of some islands in the area.

10. **Southeast Asia is home to rich traditions and cultures that produce distinctive performance arts.** Influenced by Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Islam, arts and performances from this region are unique. The various traditions of shadow puppets can be found here. Similarly, traditional plays and performances showed the influence of great cultures and civilizations.
Independence Movements within Southeast Asia

Description: Before World War II, most of Southeast Asia was colonized by Western countries. The British ruled Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, and Myanmar; the French ruled Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam; the Dutch ruled Indonesia; and the Portuguese ruled East Timor. The Spanish ruled the Philippines before sovereignty was transferred to the US. Thailand remains the only sovereignty that has not been colonized by a Western country. During the war, Japanese drove away Western countries from their territory and ruled most parts of the region. When the Allies defeated Japan in WWII, the independence movements began to rise in the region. The US granted independence to Philippines in 1946. Indonesia resisted the return of the Dutch and gained independent recognition from the former colonizer in 1949. In 1970, Indonesia occupied East Timor, which had been in a long civil war after the Portuguese left. East Timor won an UN-sponsored referendum and became an independent country in 1999.

After WWII, the British government was also pressed to grant its colonies independence. Burma gained independence in 1948, and in 1957 the British colonial government created the Federation of Malaya that consisted of Malaya, Serawak, Sabah, and Singapore as one independent country. Singapore seceded from the federation in 1965 to become an independent city-state. Brunei gained its independence from the UK in 1984.

Similarly, the Vietnamese also resisted the French and gained independence at the Geneva conference in 1954. Laos was granted self-rule as a part of French Indochina in 1947, and in 1953 the Kingdom of Laos gained its full independence. Sihanouk proclaimed the Cambodia independence in March 1945 under the Japanese occupation, and Cambodia eventually gained full sovereignty from the French in 1953.

Related Resources:

Current Tensions and Conflicts in Southeast Asia

Description: During the cold war, escalating conflicts occurred in several Southeast Asian countries culminating in the Vietnam War, which ended in 1975. After the end of the Cold War, Southeast Asian countries maintained a stable region with strong economic development. ASEAN, as the regional organization, has contributed in maintaining peace, reducing tensions, and providing foundations for a healthy relationship among its member countries. Separatist movements in some Southeast Asian countries, however, persist and often escalate to bloody conflicts. The Philippine government has to deal with the minority Muslims Moro in Mindanao; Thailand also has to deal with the Muslim minority in Southern Thailand. The Indonesian government, in the past, had to deal with Acehnese and East Timorese; Indonesia resolved the conflict by establishing special autonomy for Aceh and granting independence for East Timor. Currently the Indonesian government has to deal with the separatist movement in Papua. Myanmar has to deal with the resistance of the Rohingya people, who were denied citizenship by the Myanmar government in 1983.

In addition to the domestic separatist movements in these Southeast Asian countries, there is also territory and maritime disputes among them. The rise of China’s military power in the South China Sea heightened the tension in the region because China has claims in the disputed area.

Terrorism is also big issue as it threatens the security of the region. Some of the terrorist groups are related to the separatist movements. However, many of them were trained abroad, in Afghanistan and the Middle East—adding to the scale of the global terrorism threat.

Related Resources:

Deforestation and Urbanization within Southeast Asia

**Description:** With the rapid but uneven economic growth, Southeast Asian countries face unprecedented threats of environment degradation. Coxhead (2015) observed that “Southeast Asia’s outward orientation has been reinforced by adoption of growth and development strategies that exploit trade-based opportunities created by its abundance of labor and natural resources and by its geographic, cultural, and economic proximity to large, fast-growing economies in Northeast Asia” (p. 3). In this economic trend, deforestation and plantation as well as industrialization and urbanization are the major challenges to environment and sustainability of the region.

According to The Forest Resources Assessment 2010 of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), “primary forest in the ten Southeast Asian countries decreased from approximately 663,000 km² in 2000 to approximately 640,000 km² in 2010” (Wilcove et al. 2013, p. 532). This region is experiencing the highest rate of deforestation and forest degradation due to wood extraction, agricultural expansions, and forest fires. In 2015, haze from forest fires in Sumatra and Borneo created an environmental crisis in the region, affecting Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Southern Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia. Because this region is characterized by tremendous biodiversity—Malaysia, Indonesia and The Philippines are 3 of 17 ‘megadiverse’ countries (Fui et al. 2012, p. 358)—the destruction of forests is likely to create major problems for the region’s biodiversity.

Although cities in Southeast Asia are unique, the challenges are more common. Big cities have attracted thousands of people to come yearly because the rapid industrialization creates economic opportunities. Urbanization has brought about a wide range of issues: impacts on local-regional climate, pollution levels, water quality and availability, arable land, and livelihood and vulnerability of populations in the region (Schneider et al., 2015)

**Resources:**

**The Effects of Climate Change**

**Description:** As reported by the Asian Development Bank (2009), which analyzes models from four countries in Southeast Asia (Indonesia, The Philippines, Thailand, and Viet Nam), heat waves, droughts, floods, and tropical cyclones have been more intense and frequent, causing extensive damage to property, assets, and human life. Recorded floods and storms have risen dramatically, particularly in the Philippines, rising from just under 20 during 1960—1969 to nearly 120 by 2000—2008. These impacts of climate change will threaten the ecosystems, the peoples’ livelihood, as well as the economic development in the region.

Coastal areas in the region are the most vulnerable from the effects of climate change. The rise of sea levels threatens big cities in the coastal areas. More frequent large tidal waves, some variations of cyclones, and a potential rise of rainfall are also expected to impact the rise of sea temperatures. Consequently, the biodiversity in the regions is threatened due to the rising temperatures and changing ecosystems.

Without stepping up the efforts to battle the climate change globally, production in Southeast Asia will decline “by up to 50% in average by 2100 compared to 1990 ... a large part of the dominant forest/woodland could be replaced by tropical savanna and shrub with low or no carbon sequestration potential.” (ADB 2009, p. xxii). Economically, the impact is huge and can cost the countries “a loss of 6.7% of their combined gross domestic product by 2100, more than twice the world average.” (p. xxii).

**Resources:**

ASEAN Integrated Food Security (AIFS) Network

Description: In the aftermath of the 2007/2008 food price crisis, the ASEAN Summit of 2009 pledged to embrace food security as a permanent and high policy priority. The attainment of food security has faced several recent challenges: the economic slowdown due to the global financial crisis, the rising cost of living, and the rise of agricultural inputs due to escalating fuel prices. Emerging threats include the shift of arable land to biofuels with potential repercussions on food production, the short-term impacts of natural disasters complicated by climate change, and other long-term pressures on food production, such as urbanization, conversion of agricultural land, and migration of labor from rural areas.

Food security is defined under the AIFS Framework as a condition in which “all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” Hence, the dimensions of food security are availability, accessibility, utilization (i.e., converting access to food into nutritional well-being), and stability.

Resources:


Systems of Agriculture

Description: Since the early 1960s, Southeast Asian countries have satisfied local demand for food while catering increasingly to the world market for agricultural produce, primarily through the export of industrial crops. Local production of food, particularly rice, has kept pace with population growth, while a massive intensification of cultivation and territorial expansion of the agricultural realm have improved food security as a whole—although not for every country in the region. Expansion is also occurring in the maritime domain, with aquaculture growing even faster than land-based cultivation. Both forms of expansion have increased pressure on environmental resources, especially on forests, including coastal stands of mangrove. Countries in the region are
gambling on higher production levels that can be sustained without jeopardizing regional food security, and the stakes are very high.

“Five interlinked transformations” of the agrifood system are occurring rapidly in Asia: (1) urbanization; (2) diet change; (3) agrifood system transformation; (4) rural factor market transformation; (5) intensification of farm technology (the agricultural transformation). These transformations are linked in mutually causal ways in all directions—the transformation is of an integrated system rather than piecemeal, independent changes. This means the overall transformation has the potential to be very rapid and complicated. The new situation is not linear and easily predictable, but there remains the need to act—by both the private and public sectors—in this rapidly changing environment. Having an informed vision of these dynamic interrelationships can sharply improve the potential to act appropriately.

Resources:

The Current State of the Economy

**Description:** As of 2014 Southeast Asia is home to 620 million people, and its six large economies (Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam) and five smaller ones (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Brunei, and East Timor) together account for one-tenth of the income generated in all low- and middle-income economies worldwide. Since the 1980s, the region as a whole has achieved and sustained a remarkable rate of growth in the course of which tens of millions of its citizens have successfully escaped severe poverty.

Despite the economic growth, however, the countries of the region display a great variety of development experiences. This is due in large part to differences in initial resource endowments, systems of government and development strategies, and the pace and extent of their integration with external markets. Today’s high degree of international market integration in the region is a phenomenon with deep roots in the region’s historical role both as a unique supplier of spices and other natural resources, and as a center of maritime trade routes linking the world’s largest economies. The nature of Southeast Asia’s contemporary economic development experience is increasingly dominated by its ever-closer integration into the wider Asian and global production and trade networks for agriculture, resources, manufactures, and, increasingly, of services.

ASEAN economies now see more clearly the benefits of internal and external coordination in trade, capital markets, and external economic relations. ASEAN, the primary vehicle for regional cooperation, has taken on a far more prominent and proactive role in Southeast Asian economic life. (Source: Ian Coxhead, “Introduction: Southeast Asia’s Long Transition,” in Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Economics, edited by Ian Coxhead, 3-21, New York: Routledge, 2015.)

**Resources:**
Film and ASEAN

Description: The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community recently passed “Blueprint 2025” outlining the organization’s “commitment to lift the quality of life of its peoples through cooperative activities that are people-oriented, people-centered, environmentally friendly, and geared towards the promotion of sustainable development.” Article E, chapter 2 outlines ASEAN’s measures towards a “Creative, Innovative and Responsive ASEAN,” section 6 specifically addresses media: “Encourage and support creative industry and pursuits, such as film, music, and animation.” S. Takdir Alisjahbana says that in Southeast Asia all the great cultural and religious traditions meet as nowhere else in the world, and we need to contemplate how this meeting of such rich traditions can be harnessed for the purpose of resolving some fundamental human problems (Alisjahbana 1977, 44-53). The ASEAN countries can lay claim to diverse layers of sedimented history and cultural riches.

With the power and influence of films, this type of media becomes a very accessible educational tool to supply information about the diverse ASEAN religions, cultures, traditions, and values, while building the sense of ‘belongingness’ to come up with a ‘collective identity’ that will make the individual members of the community proud to be an ASEAN person. Films are attractive tools for all sectors of society, for different age groups, and gender as they can have different genres (e.g., romantic, adventures, comic, action, horror, etc.) that entertain as well as educate and inform. ASEAN enjoys the diversity of major world religions, ethnic traditions and values, diverse influences from east and west, and is a melting pot of the old and the new. The search for the ASEAN identity, therefore, becomes a very difficult task. With continuous exposure to each other’s cultures and way of life, however, there is a chance for the ASEAN character to slowly emerge (de la Rosa 2015, 3-4). A deliberate storytelling about the composite ASEAN person will eventually mold an image that will have its own identity. Transnationalization and regionalization, however, remain a crucial consideration, transnationalization poses as a double-edged sword with regard to the rewards and costs it brings to the local economy and society (Souchou 2001, 1-23).

An obvious benefit of the rise of film culture in Southeast Asia endures: the plurality of voices telling their personal and culturally rich stories. Numerous directors from Southeast Asia have received international acclaim, and the rise of Southeast Asian film submissions to international film festivals, such as the Cannes Film Festival and Berlinale International Film Festival, give the regional voices the opportunity for global appreciation.

Resources:


Films of Note:

• *The Missing Picture* (2013), Rithy Panh
• *The Act of Killing* (2012), Joshua Oppenheimer
• *The Look of Silence* (2014), Joshua Oppenheimer
• *Metro Manila* (2013), Sean Ellis
• *Heneral Luna* (2015), Jerrold Tarog
• *Ilo Ilo* (2013), Anthony Chen
• *Nang Nak* (1999), Nattawut Kittikun
• *Tears of the Black Tiger* (2000), Wisit Sasanatieng
• *Tropical Malady* (2004), Apichatpong Weerasethakul
• *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010), Apichatpong Weerasethakul
• *How to Win at Checkers (Every Time)* (2015), Josh Kim
• *The Scent of Green Papaya* (1993), Tran Anh Hung
• *Big Father, Small Father and Other Stories* (2015), Phan Dang Di
United in Diversity?

Description: The motto of ASEAN is “one vision, one identity, and one community.” The diverse regions with diverse ethnic groups, cultures, and languages, are imagining a burgeoning unity in terms of people, culture, and economy. ASEAN as the regional association has contributed to the imagined ASEAN community, which is more unified. The challenges, however, persist as climate change, regional political changes within the countries of Southeast Asia, and a new world order, with the rise of China and Russia, also play important roles in the dynamic of the region.

In terms of ethnicity according to the New World encyclopedia the population of Southeast Asia is “primarily descendants of Austronesian, Tai, and Mon-Khmer-speaking immigrants who migrated from Southern China during the Bronze Age and Iron Age.” However, Arab, Chinese, Indian, Polynesian and Melanesian also contribute to the genetic pool of the population. These diverse ethnic groups comprise the Southeast Asian population in general.

Resources:


Rohingya: Boat People in Southeast Asia

Description: The Muslim Rohingya are a group of people who originally lived in the Buddhist Rakhine State (formerly known as Arakan) in Myanmar. The majority of Rohingya live in the northern part of Rakhine State, in the border between Myanmar (Burma) and Bangladesh (Bengali). Rohingya people speak a dialect of Urdu Language, which is now promoted as Rohingya language. The oppressive Myanmar government does not recognize the Rohingya as legal citizens. The government considers them illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. On the other hand, the Rohingya who have lived for generations in the area have developed their identity as a distinct ethnic group with a strong Islamic identity in the Rakhine State of Myanmar.

The conflicts and tensions between Muslim Rohingya and Buddhist Rakhine can be traced back to the British colonial era, during the short period of the Japanese occupation during the World War II, and after the Burmese independence on January 4th, 1948. In the British colonial period (1824-1942), tensions and conflicts occasionally occurred between Muslim Chittagonians (what the Rohingya called themselves during the early years of Burmese independence) and Buddhist Rakhine. When the Japanese arrived in Burma, the British armed the Chittagonians to fight the Japanese, but the armed Chittagonians occasionally also ransacked Buddhist Rakhine villages. After the independence, the Burmese military regime denied citizenship to Chittagonians, the Muslim of Arakan.
The severe persecution of the Rohingya, however, heightened after the oppressive Burmese regime issued the Citizenship Law in 1982 that only granted citizenship to ethnic groups living in Burma before the first Anglo-Burman War. As a result, the Rohingya have become a stateless ethnic group and systematically marginalized by the Myanmar military regime, which denies the Rohingya access for geographic movement, education, and other social services. Since then, many of the Rohingya have been displaced and have lived in refugee camps in Bangladesh and Thailand.

In 2012 a big riot broke out between Muslim Rohingya and Buddhist Rakhine and the conflict escalated to a deathly clash in which over 140,000 of Muslim Rohingya were displaced and forced to run as refugees in the neighboring countries of Bangladesh and Thailand. The Rohingya also fled by boat, and these boat people have landed in Indonesia, Malaysia, and other Asian Pacific countries. Currently, the Rohingya are considered by the UN (United Nation) as one of the most oppressed ethnic groups in the world.

Resources