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## Authoritarianism

# Southeast Asia dares to say enough is enough

**A**riel Heryanto, Sumit Mandal and their co-writers are to be congratulated for the publication of this important book. Written and conceptualized in the period leading up to the *reformasi* (reform) upheavals in Indonesia and Malaysia, it offers the reader a serious and in-depth evaluation of the sociopolitical implications of those events.

More than that, it examines and offers fresh analyses of the challenges to the persistence of authoritarianism.

In the editors' words, Southeast Asian authoritarianism has been critically challenged in the 1990s and beyond. Civil forces, which the book examines so richly, have been shown to have resisted the authoritarianism found in both Indonesia and Malaysia, with salutary results.

Women activists, public intellectuals, artists, the industrial class, environmental and Islamic activists continue to make significant inroads into hegemonic and panoptic edifices of the state.

However, resistance and challenges to authoritarianism do not by themselves bring about "democracy". Indeed, the editors stress the point that authoritarianism and democracy should not be seen as a dichotomy or as polar opposites. One doesn't necessarily flow into the other nor does one necessarily give way to the other. Implicit in the book's approach is a critique of the discourse of democracy itself.

The idea needs deep evaluation in terms of its dynamics and manifestations in the region. And so-called democratic regimes are never devoid of strains and inflexions of authoritarianism. Clearly the writers offer a rich discussion of the variety and the many layers and layerings of resistance to authoritarianism in the two countries.

Heryanto's important theoretical chapter examines middle class civil forces and intel-

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lectuals, and finds significant examples of challenges to authoritarianism. Of particular interest is the case study of Satya Wacana Christian University (SWCU) in Indonesia which is analyzed in depth.

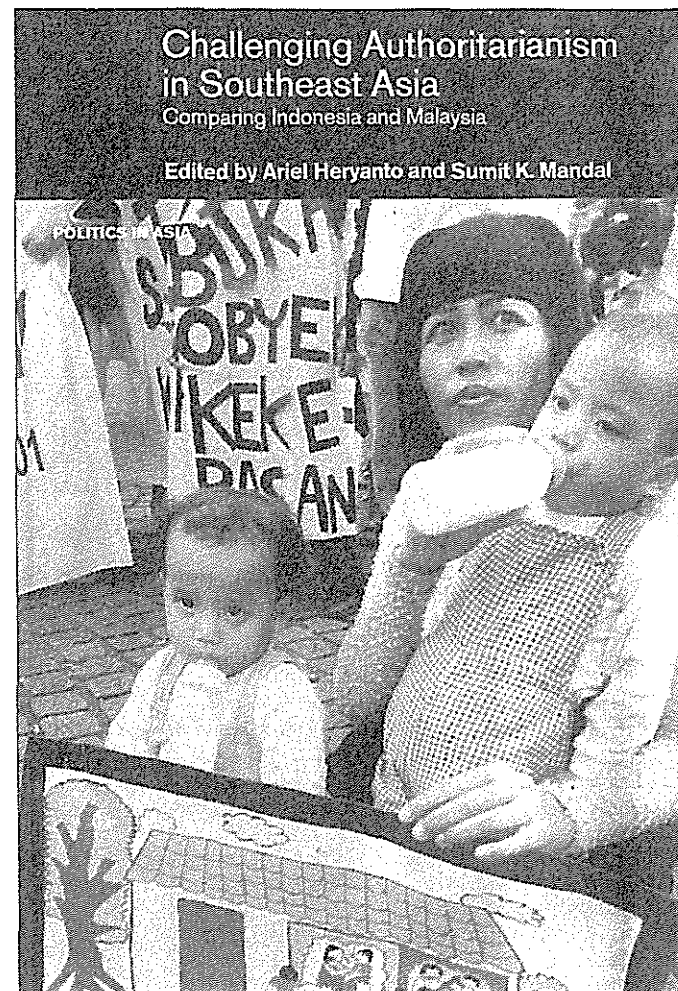
This case highlights the role of Indonesian intellectuals in resisting authoritarianism. Heryanto also looks at some examples from Malaysia focusing on reform intellectuals.

Much work still needs to be done here but the citation of Sabri Zain's work (author of *Reformasi Diary*) is significant. Beyond specific intellectuals, many middle class groups and actors were clearly fired up by the *reformasi* movements in both countries. More than any other event in recent history the movements have brought to the fore civil forces as direct and indirect agents of political change and transition, whether or not this had led to the toppling of a regime.

The book is unique in that the writers have dug deep into the experiences of both countries, giving cases and examples often ignored or unanalyzed in the past by academics. Kelly offers examples from Penang, an island thought to be a nest of important NGOs in the region — CAP, ALIRAN, TWN, SAM, MNS, among others.

Kelly posits that a "secular civil society" has emerged in Penang in contrast to his other case study of Batam island. The chapter examines in some detail the issue of environmental degradation and cites the successful "Save Penang Hill" campaign.

Mandal's chapter is groundbreaking in that it offers an interpretation of the "art workers" as resisters to authoritarianism. Typically, artists, dramatists, poets and



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literary writers will carve out social spaces and terrains not normally deemed by authorities to be "political" or threatening to the regime, but in effect, artists generate resistance which burrows deep into the social fabric.

He offers many examples, too many to name here, but the formation in Malaysia of the Artis Pro-Activ (APA) in Kuala Lumpur is a particularly interesting example.

Not unconnected to this

group is the Instant Cafe Theater which has been as effective in the area of entertainment as it has been as a social critic often unbeknownst to those in power. However, in July 2003, the Kuala Lumpur City Council threatened to withdraw the troupe's license to perform, indicating a belated understanding by the state of the power of political satire.

Ironically, middle class forces and actors have pro-

vided much resistance in states such as Indonesia and Malaysia. In some analyses, the middle class, seen as a beneficiary of globalization, is often thought to be the first defender of the authoritarian state.

However in both countries, various middle class groups have become significant and powerful advocates and champions of democracy. The empirical and yet nuanced evaluation of middle class forces offered by the writers in the various chapters is indeed a very welcome and refreshing treatment of the subject.

Of course, there are contexts, constraints and limits to resistance. Here I like to highlight Noraini Othman's chapter which deals with Islamization. Delving deeply into the Malaysian case, she shows how Islamization has negatively affected women's rights. Muslim women are doubly faced not just by a domination of patriarchal norms but one refurbished by calls to implement a more comprehensive sharia (Islamic law).

The problem is further compounded in Malaysia by the Islamic opposition party PAS, linked to *reformasi* forces but attempting the implementation of criminal Islamic law (hudud). Such ironies are not lost on the writer, a member of Sisters-In-Islam, who provides the reader with a sturdy study of the problems of addressing authoritarianism in Muslim societies.

Both Malaysia and Indonesia are ethnically mixed countries and Budiarta's chapter on gender politics shows that women's activism in both countries has developed multicultural approaches which transcend ethnicity and religion. However, it is clear that as majority Muslim states, Indonesia and Malaysia will continue to be confronted with issues of "political" Islam in years to come, given the thrust of high profile Muslim political parties in both coun-

tries. The development of "secular" civil society as opposed to the discourse of the so-called "Islamic" state has clearly begun to impact on mainstream politics in both countries.

Another major constraint on the resistance to authoritarianism concerns labor and especially the issue of migrant workers. The chapter by Hadiz shows that a "disconnect" exists between social activism and the labor movement. The vast influx of literally millions of Indonesian "guest" workers into Malaysia has failed to prod a weak Malaysian trade union movement to champion their rights.

As late industrializers operating with a "tight labor market", the only apparent progressive trajectory of the Indonesian and Malaysian labor movements would be the development of the capacity for self-organization in the long term. O'Donnell's insight about the authoritarian state's complicit role with global capital still applies here.

Let me reiterate two of the more significant comparative issues pertaining to the problem of authoritarianism. These "cross-national" issues are important in that a learning curve exists between the two neighboring countries often through the communications and interventions by social activists of both countries. The writers of this book are themselves important agents of such cross-national learning.

The first cross-national issue would be women's rights and gender. Budiarta's thorough and comparative chapter shows that women's activism is not only significant but has been effective in some ways in both countries while leaving still much more work to be done.

Budiarta suggests that women's activism is much more advanced in Malaysia, with Malaysian women even putting up a candidate in the last election (1999) under the

Women's Candidacy Initiative. However, in both countries, empowerment of women remains weak given the pervasiveness of patriarchal norms articulating within conservative societies while ethnic and religious revivalism tend to act in a hegemonic rather than in a counter-hegemonic fashion.

The second cross-national issue is the role of middle class forces. Chapters by Heryanto, Mandal and others illustrate the importance of middle class actors and forces in resisting authoritarianism in both countries. Yet, middle class activism is limited and is also often a two-edged sword. It is limited especially in Indonesia where the bulk of society is constituted by a disempowered peasantry and weak, disorganized working class.

In Malaysia, which has increasingly become a middle class society, an opposite irony seems to be true; the spoils of developmentalism will lure most of the increasingly affluent working and middle classes away from political activism.

Secondly, while middle forces in both countries may become effervescent and activated in times of economic crises, they tend to slink into political indifference in times of prosperity. On the brighter side, years of prosperity in both countries, especially in the mid-1990s, failed to eliminate many significant middle class forces of civil society.

While we may have no final answers to the many issues of democratic transition in Indonesia and Malaysia raised in the book, its insightful and ground-breaking analyses will definitely provide the reader with the conceptual tools to probe deeper into the question.

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