

Book Review: Ariel Heryanto and Sumit K. Mandal (2003). Challenging Authoritarianism

Open in app ↗

Sign up

Sign in

Medium

Search



7 min read · 3 days ago



Januar A. Pratama

Follow



Listen



Share

Challenging Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia

Comparing Indonesia and Malaysia

Edited by Ariel Heryanto and Sumit K. Mandal

POLITICS IN ASIA

Note: This book review was submitted to the AS6001 Comparative Politics of Asia course during my Master's study at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in 2023.

The start of the 21st century marks a new chapter in the political landscape of Indonesia and Malaysia, thanks to the *Reformasi* movements. Although neither directly connected nor synchronized, the democratic struggles in both countries continue to provide a sound basis for studying how different circumstances in neighboring countries with an ethnic affinity and experiences of colonialism can

bring forth varying degrees of democratization processes. Furthermore, they also raised an important question: How does civil society respond to authoritarianism when they are left with little to no choice but to obey and abide?

Challenging Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia: Comparing Indonesia and Malaysia, edited by Ariel Heryanto and Sumit K. Mandal, provides what it has promised in its title: how the authoritarian regimes in Indonesia and Malaysia are being challenged. However, as opposed to following the “second coming of positivism” in the late 1990s (Schram et al., 2013, p. 363), the authors in the edited volume embraced an interpretive approach in describing and analyzing historical, sociological, and cultural aspects of civil society in facing the ever-looming threat of authoritarianism at the time. Going even further, Heryanto and Mandal unfurl the book’s sails away from focusing on formal institutions and to the ocean of political dynamics beyond, providing alternative views on how the democratization processes unroll in the two countries.

Such alternative views are provided through the experiences of various non-state actors involved in what Pratt (2004, p. 7) called counter-hegemony: “an alternative hegemony on the terrain of civil society in preparation for political change.” The experiences themselves were expertly and even personally, for some due to their participation, put into words by the authors. Heryanto and Mandal, as editors, opened the discussion eloquently by emphasizing the often-marginalized forces of democratization struggle against authoritarian forces as a key theme and the empirical accentuation that will be brought up in the following six chapters.

The first three following chapters tell the actors’ experiences concerning their economic milieu. Heryanto follows the first chapter with the empirical cases of the academia at Satya Wacana Christian University, media journalists, and “professional” activists as middle-class “intellectuals” in Indonesia in their role of being an oppositional force. Phillip N. Kelly then discussed and compared the cases of civil society organizations’ progressivity concerning the rapid economic development in Penang and Batam, where he found how historical and cultural factors play much significance in determining the type and the behavior of civil society; in this instance, Kelly used Rodan’s (1996) analytical framework on separating the state and the society. Meanwhile, Vedi R. Hadiz highlighted how the working class is being domesticated through brutal repression in Indonesia and regularized through legal bureaucracy in Malaysia through the models of accommodation that he theorized in a previous work (Hadiz, 1997).

However, the book's most exciting chapters are in the last three chapters. In the fifth and sixth chapters, both Norani Othman and Melani Budianta are participants in the very democratization forces they discussed themselves, while in the last chapter, Sumit K. Mandal provided a much-needed analysis on the movements of a severely under-discussed actor: the art workers in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Othman was one of the founders of Sisters in Islam, a group challenging the authoritarian nature of gender relationships and women's rights in Malaysia. She disclosed how Islamization policies (through the dual legal system: constitutional laws and Sharia laws in the form of fatwa) implemented in Malaysia were problematic towards women, as they reinforced patriarchal structures in a feminist perspective, even at the household level. In response, women's activism rose prominently, offering alternative interpretations of the Quran on various issues, including polygamy and Islamic family laws.

Budianta then continued the women's activism discussion with the case study of Indonesia, with within-case studies chosen according to West and Blumberg's (1990) theory of protest arenas: economic, national, humanistic, and gender issues. In the case study, women's struggles against state authoritarianism went beyond their gender identity and became intersectional. Hence, they are not only feminists but also democratic activists, reflected in their frequency of interfaith prayers and proximity to the working-class movements. One fascinating observation is how women's rights activism is being compared between the two countries. As Othman herself admitted, women and Islamist activism in Indonesia are more pluralistic and confrontational than in Malaysia, and that reflected how Malaysia's less-brutal bureaucratic authoritarianism is no less gripping than Indonesian military iron fist rule.

Finally, Mandal fills the book's closing chapter with an elaboration of a quite under-discussed force of democratization in Indonesia and Malaysia: the art workers. While he disclaimed that art activism does not bring down rulers, it proves its significance by reflecting the civil society's prevalent political views. He pointed out how the arts may not necessarily be politicized, and the audiences' political awareness shapes the meaning of the arts themselves, as per the ideologization theory by Jasper (1984). Thus, art workers may deliberately or incidentally engage with authoritarianism in both cases.

As elaborated in the preceding paragraphs, the book *Challenging Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia* has packed quite diverse sets of perspectives and tied them together well through an explicit linking of the chapters in the introductory chapter. Suppose one were to read the individual chapters alone without reading the editor's introduction. In that case, they might misread the book as a disconnected anthology, not an edited volume providing rich insights on under-discussed issues. Therefore, the editors' work linking the authors' thinking is laudable, both in the introductory and individual chapters, through reference to the other chapters.

Other than that, the qualitative methodology employed in the book's writing is consistent with the interpretivist approach. The in-depth qualitative analysis of each case was instrumental at the time of publication, whereas Heryanto stated that there was a gap in the discourses of democratization and authoritarianism in Indonesia and Malaysia in terms of the non-formal power structure, such as those found in the societal and cultural level of both countries. The edited format also helps the book become quite comprehensive due to having a broad list of topics; the chapters left an impression of how many different actors work outside of the formal mechanisms and are able to influence them, highlighting the reciprocity of state-society relations.

While the methodology and format have brought comprehensiveness to the issue at hand, alas, the editors neither explain nor justify the order of the chapters. As mentioned, the last three chapters offer substantially novel insights on some of the most under-discussed actors, even amongst the non-state actors. However, the book starts instead with arguably the most privileged actors of them all, the so-called "middle-class intellectuals." As the second chapter suggests, they face various challenges in supporting democratization; however, generally, they do not face intersectional challenges such as low leverage due to economic status or being silenced due to gender identity. Thus, in order to reinforce the book's purpose of highlighting under-discussed democratization by non-state actors, the editors should justify how the chapters were arranged, in a sense to give the audience an understanding of the logic behind the editors' choices and intentions.

Furthermore, there needs to be more consistency between the chapters in the style and depth of each writing. While it is important to note that this is an edited book featuring different authors from diverse backgrounds, it needs to be clarified regarding who the audience is for each chapter. Heryanto's chapter on the "intellectuals" is quite engaging, and its wording could be easily comprehensible for

general audiences. Meanwhile, the chapters by Kelly, Hadiz, Othman, and Budianta might be helpful for knowledgeable audiences. However, the chapter by Mandal could be challenging to comprehend for audiences not focusing on the discourse of art in politics, hence indirectly opposing the book's very purpose. Understandably, the editors would try to retain the authors' way of deliberation as much as possible. However, it would be better if the chapters were consistently written to avoid disrupting the audience's train of thought.

Nevertheless, *Challenging Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia* remains a significant piece in Indonesia and Malaysia's discourse of democratization and authoritarianism. It highlighted various actors working outside the formal power structure at a time when analysis of formal actors dominated the discourse. Overall, the book provided a spark for future research on marginalized actors.

References

Hadiz, V.R. (1997). *Workers and the State in New Order Indonesia*. London: Routledge.

Jasper, J.M. (1984). Art and audiences: Do politics matter? *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, 29, 153–80. Accessed on 29 August 2023, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41035337>

Pratt, N. (2004). Bringing politics back in: examining the link between globalization and democratization. *Review of International Political Economy*, 11(2), 311–336. DOI: 10.1080/0969229042000249831

Rodan, G. (1996). *Political Oppositions in Industrialising Asia*. London: Routledge.

Schram, S., Flyvbjerg, B., & Landman, T. (2013). Political Political Science: A Phronetic Approach. *New Political Science*, 35(3), 359–372. DOI: 10.1080/07393148.2013.813687

West, G. and Blumberg, R.L. (1990). *Women and Social Protest*. New York: OxfordUniversity Press.

Southeast Asia

Politics

Authoritarianism

Indonesia

Malaysia