

Book Review: Strategies of Authoritarian Survival and Dissensus in Southeast Asia by Sokphea Young

In Strategies of Authoritarian Survival and Dissensus in Southeast Asia, Sokphea Young argues that the success of civil society organisation (CSO) movements in Cambodia, Malaysia and Indonesia depends largely on whether these movements are seen as threats to the regime's winning coalition. This book's powerful examination lays important foundations for further research examining the link between regime survival and civil society success, writes Bavo Stevens.

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***Strategies of Authoritarian Survival and Dissensus in Southeast Asia: Weak Men Versus Strongmen.* Sokphea Young. Palgrave. 2021.**

'Why do some movements succeed while others fail in the context of a regime's political survival?' That is the question at the heart of Sokphea Young's ambitious book, [Strategies of Authoritarian Survival and Dissensus in Southeast Asia](#). The book engages with the complex literatures on authoritarian repression and clientelism to tease out when civil society organisation (CSO) movements and protests are successful in achieving their aims. Young's close analysis of contemporary Cambodia, alongside two shorter interventions on Indonesia and Malaysia, suggests that the success of CSO movements ultimately depends on how regimes respond to them. Young's work shows that even when CSOs are strong and well-organised, their success largely depends on whether they are seen as threats to the regime. When CSOs are seen as a threat, regimes are likely to opt for repression. But when CSOs are not seen as a threat, regimes are less likely to repress and opt instead for a concessionary strategy.

In the first part of the book, Young broadly examines the politics of authoritarian control and the political development of modern Cambodia, showing how issues of patrimonialism, repression and control intersect in the country. Young effectively lays out the central challenges that rulers confront in holding on to power, particularly in maintaining support from their winning coalitions through effective client-patron relations. Young casts Prime Minister Hun Sen as the central patron in Cambodia, who has used extractive economic institutions to maintain support and partial political legitimacy. A second strategy that Young describes is the co-option of CSOs, especially CSOs whose work closely aligns with the interests of the regime.





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Young then examines two cases emblematic of his central thesis. The first case looks at a peasant movement targeting a powerful Cambodian senator with close ties to the ruling regime and a sugar company. The well-organised movement that developed in response to the expropriation of land by the sugar company threatened the interest of the Baron and, by extension, the ruling regime. The regime's violent crackdown on protestors and intimidation of activists, in addition to blocking action through the courts, mean that the movement failed to achieve its demands, including the return of the expropriated land.

The second case presents a slightly different story. A European company with agricultural stakes in the country faced a loosely organised response by an indigenous community that felt its land was unfairly expropriated by the company. But unlike the Sugar Baron, the local partner that worked with the European company did not have strong ties to the ruling regime. As a consequence, the regime felt less threatened by the community's movement, which gave its local officials the space to use regulatory instruments to address the CSO movement's demands as part of its more concessional strategy. The community was able to partially fulfil its goal and received some compensation for its lost land.

In short, the first CSO movement, despite being relatively strong and well-organised, threatened the regime's neo-patrimonial network and faced a repressive response that prevented it from achieving its goals. The second CSO movement, which was relatively weak and more loosely organised, did not threaten the regime's network, and faced a more concessionary strategy that allowed it to partially achieve its goals. The argument presented in these two chapters is overall convincing. The in-depth analysis of these two cases with a broader discussion of CSO movements and neo-patrimonialism presents a convincing case of Young's argument: it is ultimately the regime's response that matters the most.

It is in its discussion of Cambodia that the ambitions and strengths of the book shine. By identifying how 'threats from society' can challenge the interests of a regime's neo-patrimonial network, Young is able to show that distinguishing between threats of authoritarian power-sharing and control, like [Milan Svoblik](#) also demonstrates, is not always so clear cut. Rather, they inform each other; threats from society and threats from elites are linked.

The strong discussion on Cambodia sets Young up for an interesting comparative analysis with Malaysia and Indonesia in the two penultimate chapters of the book. Though Young is able to show that similar patterns existed in Malaysia and Indonesia, this is not argued as clearly as the earlier chapters on Cambodia. For one, the analytical focus in the Malaysia and Indonesia chapters shifts somewhat from CSO movements and the neo-patrimonial networks of the regimes to the survival strategies of former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and Suharto, former President of Indonesia. The chapters point to changes to the winning coalitions of the respective regimes, rivalries that existed within these coalitions and how Mahathir and Suharto navigated their rivalries with other elites and responded to challenges from society. Young's discussion in these chapters is not as sophisticated as his analyses of CSO movements in Cambodia because the reader is given less information on the strength and strategies of the CSO movements Young studies nor evidence on the winning coalition of the regime.

Secondly, where Young does discuss CSO movements, the neo-patrimonial links appear more tenuous. For instance, in the chapter on Malaysia, Young discusses several dam-building projects. One of the projects Young highlights is the Bakun project, which resumed after the Asian financial crisis with one of the Prime Minister's close friends, Ting Pek Khiing, awarded the contract. This suggests that similar dynamics are at play, but it is never clearly established if Ting Pek Khiing was an initial member of Mahathir's winning coalition, what the scope and strength of the CSO movement that protested the project were or if broader economic factors following the 1997 crisis influenced the decision to move forward with the project.

Similar concerns emerge in the chapter on Indonesia, where Young discusses similar examples of resistance. One notable example is the movement against the Kedung Ombo dam project. The project faced continued protests from the people of Boyolali whose land was to be flooded. The protestors took their case to court, with the Supreme Court ultimately ruling for \$4.5 million in compensation. Suharto intervened and overturned the project and the compensation was voided. Young argues that Suharto intervened to maintain the economic interests of the crony system that underpinned his regime since many dams were funded by Indonesian cement companies, some of which belonged to his siblings and allies. But if that is the primary reason why the Kedung Ombo project moved forward, it is left somewhat unclear why the movement against the Lindu dam project was more successful. Like the Bakun project in Malaysia, questions about the scope and strength of the CSO movement also remain unanswered.

Despite some of these limitations, Young's book offers a powerful look at the strategies of authoritarian survival and how they shape the success and failure of CSO movements. It is work by scholars like Young that helps add significant nuance to our understanding of how authoritarian regimes can operate. Young sheds light on why authoritarian regimes respond differently to the demands of similar civil society organisations and demonstrates that the neat divide between threats from elites and threats from society in understanding regime durability is rarely so neat. The book is therefore able to lay important foundations for further research that examines the link between regime survival and civil society success.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics and Political Science.
