

LSE SAW SWEE HOCK  
SOUTHEAST ASIA CENTRE

# Annual Report

2023 — 2024

John T. Sidel

October 17th, 2024

## Notes from the Director's Chair

*"A full year has elapsed since I assumed the directorship of the LSE's Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Centre, and much has happened over the intervening twelve months, across Southeast Asia, in the field of Southeast Asian Studies, and at the Centre itself."* Prof John T. Sidel, SEAC Director reflects on the happenings of the 2023/24 year both in Southeast Asia and at SEAC.

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A full year has elapsed since I assumed the directorship of the LSE's Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Centre, and much has happened over the intervening twelve months, across Southeast Asia, in the field of Southeast Asian Studies, and at the Centre itself. Across the region, Southeast Asian economies have maintained an average of more than 4% GDP growth per annum over 2023-2024 in the face of the economic slowdown in China and continuing problems with inflation and instability in world markets. As in the pre-pandemic years of somewhat greater economic dynamism, this growth has been very uneven in terms of individual country performance, intra-regional disparities within countries, and socioeconomic inequalities within the societies of the region. Across Southeast Asia, moreover, continuing economic growth has been accompanied by persistent problems of labour exploitation, pollution, and environmental degradation, and by enduring pockets of poverty amidst increasing prosperity for the region's expanding middle classes.

Over the past year, the region's continuing economic dynamism in the face of global challenges and constraints has not been matched or mirrored in the political realm. Instead, the past twelve months have seen the success of entrenched political elites in ensuring continuity of authoritarian and oligarchical rule in the face of ongoing demographic, economic, social, and technological change. In Cambodia, long-time strongman Hun Sen passed on the premiership to his son Hun Manet in August 2023, enabling a smooth dynastic transition under continuing CPP rule. In Vietnam, the death of long-time Communist Party General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng in July 2024 paved the

way for former security czar – and, since May 2024, President – Tô Lâm to ascend to the Party leadership and begin to consolidate power. In Singapore, long-time PAP leader and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong passed the baton to his protégé Lawrence Wong, a former civil servant, MP, and cabinet minister. In Myanmar, military rule under the leadership of General Min Aung Hlaing has persisted in the face of impressive gains by armed insurgent forces and amidst rumours of internal dissatisfaction within the Army itself.

The engineering of continuity from above rather than change from below has likewise been the rule in the oligarchical democracies of the region. Two-term Indonesian president Joko Widodo ('Jokowi') helped to secure the victory of Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto in the February 2024 presidential elections, with his own son Gibran Rakabuming Raka elected as vice-president as part of the bargain between the former rivals. In the Philippines, 2023-2024 saw the continuing consolidation of power by recently elected President Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos, Jr., whose father served as president from 1966 through early 1986, including nearly fourteen years of martial law rule.

In Thailand, interference by the military, the monarchy, and the courts prevented the reformist Move Forward Party from forming a government after its first-place showing in the May 2023 elections and eventually forced the dissolution of the party in August 2024. The Pheu Thai Party of controversial former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra has been allowed to form a government, but only in condominium with parties closely intertwined with the establishment and under terms dictated by the military and the monarchy. In Malaysia, constraints on political change are likewise in evidence, with long-time oppositionist Anwar Ibrahim only retaining the premiership since 2022 through an opportunistic coalition with UMNO, the party machine entrenched in power from 1959 through 2018. All in all, the past year has not seen much positive movement towards greater pluralism, competition, participation, transparency, or accountability in political and public life across Southeast Asia.

Against this backdrop, scholars and other interested observers of Southeast Asia may take some comfort in the continuing vitality and vibrancy of Southeast Asian Studies as a field of serious research and analysis, as evidenced in the publication of a diverse range of articles, books, and reports across a broad set of academic disciplines and beyond. The years 2023 and 2024, for example, have seen the publication of no less than five impressive and important new books – by Mark Dizon, Kristie Patricia Flannery, Adrian De Leon, Diego Javier Luis, and Stephanie Joy Mawson – which individually and together have dramatically expanded and enhanced our understanding of the colonial history of the Philippines. The past year has likewise seen the publication of major scholarly studies on topics as varied as electoral politics in the democracies of the region, public health challenges in Vietnam, armed conflict in Myanmar, and a diverse range of other topics of current interest. In June 2024, for example, the Vancouver-based journal *Pacific Affairs* published a special issue focused on the impact of hydropower dam projects in China, Laos, and Cambodia on the Mekong River, its flora and fauna, and the fishing communities who depend on its shifting flows

and bounties for their livelihoods. The depth, nuance, and sophistication of such recent scholarship on these complex issues is truly impressive.

Over the past year, academic debates about Southeast Asian cultures and histories have also occasionally attracted public attention around the world. Claims in the 2022 Netflix series *Ancient Apocalypse* and by Indonesian researchers in a 2023 article in the journal *Archaeological Prospection* that the Gunung Padang site in West Java is the world's "oldest pyramid" attracted considerable controversy among scholars, generating news reports in publications like *The Observer* and leading to a retraction by the journal. Competing theories concerning the origins and isolation of the Punan Batu people living in the rainforests of eastern Indonesian Borneo (Kalimantan Timur) likewise featured in a September 2023 front-page story in *The New York Times*. For Southeast Asianists, it is perhaps heartening – or at least in itself interesting if not unproblematic – that in far flung places like London and New York there is still some public interest (however fleeting) in the Palaeolithic history and indigenous peoples of the region. The Orientalists have not yet eaten the last cannibal after all!

Beyond the ivory tower, moreover, non-academic research on Southeast Asia over the past twelve months has been equally impressive and illuminating. Over 2023-2024, investigative journalists have expanded our awareness of labour exploitation in various parts of Southeast Asia in connection with the digital economy, most notoriously in 'scam factories' hidden in enclosed compounds within which working conditions compared to slavery have belatedly attracted police intervention and public attention. Over the past year, moreover, the investigative journalist Ian Urbina and his *Outlaw Ocean Project* followed up on their previous revelations of labour exploitation on Thai fishing fleets with new reports on the exploitation of Southeast Asian fishermen on Chinese fishing fleets, not only in the South China Sea but also off the Pacific coast of South America.

Meanwhile, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other organizations have continued to document human rights abuses in countries across Southeast Asia and in countries where Southeast Asian migrant workers are subjected to human trafficking and exploitation. NGOs like *The Gecko Project* and *Mongabay* have kept tracking the corruption, deforestation, environmental degradation, and exploitation involved in the expansion of logging operations and palm oil plantations across areas of the region such as the provinces of Indonesian Borneo. At the same time, the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, sponsored by the Washington, DC-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), has been meticulously tracing developments and trends related to disputes between China and its maritime Southeast Asian neighbours over territorial claims, shipping lanes, commercial fishing and oil exploration rights, and the islands, atolls, shoals, and 'features' of the South China Sea. Hitech outfits like *TeleGeography* have been regularly updating their maps of the submarine fibre-optic cables connecting Southeast Asia to the global circuitries of the Internet. Never before has so much information about Southeast Asia been so readily available and so carefully analysed, by scholars and other researchers around the world, for better and, as the late great Southeast Asianist James C. Scott (1936-2024) reminds us, for worse.

Against this backdrop, the work of the LSE's Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Centre over the past twelve months has proceeded on multiple fronts in its efforts to serve as a hub for Southeast Asian Studies in London, the UK, and Europe as a whole. Over the course of the 2023-2024 academic year, we organized weekly talks covering a diverse range of disciplines, themes, and countries across Southeast Asia, in many cases spotlighting – and 'launching' – newly published books by leading scholars of the region. We also hosted special events focused on 'hot topics', with roundtable discussions on the political succession from Hun Sen to Hun Manet in Cambodia (November 2023) and the elections in Indonesia (February 2024), the ongoing conflict in Myanmar (June 2024), plus our annual Southeast Asia Forum on the challenges of sustainable economic growth in the region (May 2024).

Such efforts to sponsor and spotlight the latest research on Southeast Asia have extended to our blog series, our working paper series, and, most recently, our new podcast series, 'Dialogues on Southeast Asia', which is available via the New Books Network on platforms like Spotify. Highlights include a new working paper co-authored by LSE Geography Professor Neil Lee on Singapore's success in promoting the digital economy, and podcast interviews with other LSE colleagues on peatland wildfires in Borneo (Dr. Thomas Smith), the Wa State of northern Myanmar (Dr. Hans Steinmuller), and the history of the Sino-Vietnamese border (Dr. Qingfei Yin), plus a special podcast interview on recent trends in Malaysian politics with Professor Meredith Weiss (SUNY Albany). Through in-person and online participation in our events, through our blog, podcast, and working papers series, and through Visiting Fellows like Professor Deepanshu Mohan of Jindal Global University in New Delhi, India, the Centre has reached out to include Southeast Asia experts and interested audiences from across the globe.

At the same time, the Centre has worked to address student interests and needs related to the study of Southeast Asia, both within the LSE and beyond. We have provided research funding for MSc dissertations and, more generously, for PhD students working on the region. We have supported the London Burma Reading Group in its efforts to build and sustain a community of scholars and others interested in research and discussions related to Myanmar. We ran two special reading group sessions for Indonesian students – at the LSE and beyond – interested in revisiting the historic events of October 1965 and May 1998, whose significance has long been misrepresented in official accounts and otherwise misunderstood despite the availability of in-depth scholarly research and analysis. We also hosted a special day-long workshop for PhD students working on Southeast Asia from across the UK. Finally, the past twelve months have also seen the Centre engage in broader outreach beyond the realm of academic research. LSE scholars working on Southeast Asia have long engaged with government agencies, multilateral institutions, NGOs, and other organizations interested in the region, and the Centre has begun to explore new kinds of institutional engagements along these lines as well. In March 2024, the Centre ran a three-day special training course for diplomats at the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) focused on Southeast Asia, with members of LSE academic staff affiliated with the Centre

giving lectures and answering questions relating to UK foreign policy towards the region. We hope that this new initiative will lead to further such engagements over the years ahead, both with the new British government and with other institutional partners as well.

Overall, the 2023-2024 academic year has been a very busy, productive, exciting, and enjoyable one for me as the new director of the LSE's Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Centre. Here I have been very lucky to be able to draw on the considerable pool of 'local talent' among LSE academic staff and students working on Southeast Asia, the institution-building work of the previous Centre director Hyun Bang Shin and our Centre Manager Katie Boulton, and the support of the Centre's Management Committee and its Advisory Board. Over the past year, moreover, I have relied very heavily on Katie Boulton and then, since January 2024, Jessica Landas as Centre Manager, Meutia Sukma as Events and Communications Assistant, and Canpu Sun as our Graduate Intern for their generous advice and assistance in the running a diverse set of activities and events, and I owe them a huge debt of gratitude. With events and activities for the 2024- 2025 academic year already under planning and in prospect, I am very much looking forward to the year ahead at the Centre and to reporting and reflecting once again on our work in a year's time.

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*\*The views expressed in the blog are those of the author alone. They do not reflect the position of the Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Centre, nor that of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

\*Read more about the 2023/24 activities of the Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Centre in the [2023/24 Annual Report](#).

## About the author



### John T. Sidel

John T. Sidel is the Sir Patrick Gillam Professor of Comparative and International Politics and Director of the Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Centre at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His research on Southeast Asia has spanned issues of political violence, subnational authoritarianism, nationalism and state-building, especially in the Philippines and Indonesia. His most recent book, 'Republicanism, Communism, Islam: Cosmopolitan Origins of Revolution in Southeast Asia', is available via Cornell University Press.

# Read Next

Book Review: Republicanism, Communism, Islam: Cosmopolitan Origins of Revolution in Southeast Asia by John T. Sidel

November 29th, 2021



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