

# Book Review: Party Politics in Southeast Asia: Clientelism and Electoral Competition in Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines

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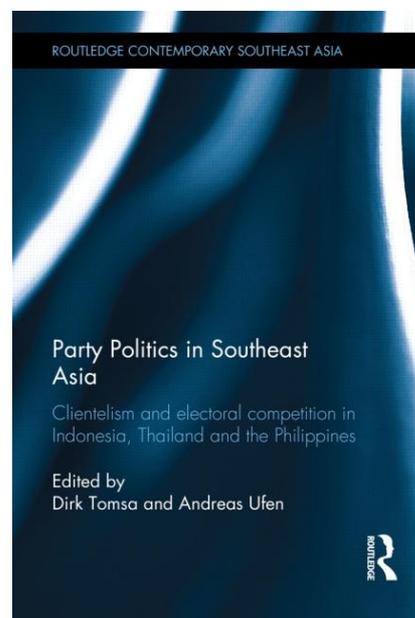
*Contributing to the growing discourse on political parties in Asia, this edited collection looks at parties in Southeast Asia's most competitive electoral democracies of Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines. Focusing on the prominence of clientelistic practices and strategies, both within parties as well as between parties and their voters, the authors argue that demonstrates that clientelism is extremely versatile and can take many forms. **Hansley A. Juliano** believes this book will be of interest to students and scholars of contemporary Southeast Asian politics, but feels some of the essays lack innovative thinking.*



**Party Politics in Southeast Asia: Clientelism and Electoral Competition in Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines. Dirk Tomsa and Andreas Ufen. Routledge. October 2012.**

## Find this book:

In the introduction to *Party Politics in Southeast Asia*, editors Dirk Tomsa and Andreas Ufen write: "The academic consensus about the importance of political parties contrasts sharply with their often negative image amongst ordinary voters" (p. 2). Inasmuch as political parties are claimed as important to the practice of formal democracy, they have acquired a very negative reputation over the past years, no less in developing democracies in Asia. This has been attributed to their inability to capture the changing dynamics of public interest, their lack of programmatic and integrative systems to promote political socialization, and more markedly, their continuing identification with clientelistic and exclusivist means of constituency-building.



The book is a collection of studies by academics that focus on the transformations of the role of clientelism in shaping party and electorate relations, making the argument that contemporary forms and practices of party politics are largely characterized by such relationships. The studies, specifically centred along Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines, attempt to exhibit how clientelistic practices and relationships persist among political parties due to four important factors. As enumerated, these include: (1) modernization that, instead of effacing patron-client relations, formalizes, rationalizes, and professionalizes them; (2) differentiations in consolidating political ideology and culture, which can either minimize or actually stimulate clientelistic practices; (3) path-dependent dynamics that are historically rooted and cultivated, solidifying over the years; and (4) institutional factors such as electoral and party laws, the checks and balances between executive and legislative branches, and the continuing decentralization of power to local bosses.



Dirk Tomsa looks at institutional attempts to bring parties to a certain level of political maturity and substance. While ways of promoting political party engineering along nationalized and programmatic lines have been tried in Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines, these attempts have always ended in failure, or have only stimulated token support at best. Attempts at imposing policies for the creation of national political parties are unable to stimulate interest and support, since as electorate voting behaviour remains shaped and embedded in localized interests (determined either geographically or personally). In an attempt to expand on [the party typologies first initiated by Richard Gunther and Larry Diamond](#), Tomsa also tried to classify these parties. Nonetheless, he concluded that most of these parties are largely hybrid in nature, and he points to the hybridity of Southeast Asian parties (scattered across the Gunther-Diamond typology) as an example of how clientelistic political parties are becoming more adaptive and dynamic, and therefore more resistant to attempts to rationalize them.

Such resistance to transformation along participatory lines seems to be the source of persistent distrust against political parties. Paige Johnson Tan, in studying anti-party attitudes in Southeast Asia, points to a mutual perception among the subject countries that parties remain ineffectual, too numerous, and very fragmented to competently represent the interests and groups they supposedly speak for. In the case of Thailand, she noted how the members of the Thai elite (the military, the bureaucracy, and those surrounding the monarchy) remain disdainful of the parties' attempts to compete with them in consolidating political power. While elite distrust for parties is expected to be counteracted by popular support, it seems that the masses of Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines are similarly unconvinced of their necessity. Indonesian voters prefer more professional cabinet members than political appointees. Filipino populist candidates will garner more votes than established political parties, unless the parties have populist frontrunners themselves. Similarly, Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party manages to enjoy wide support due to its self-proclaimed "anti-party" sentiment.

The book is adamant in maintaining that political parties —in their formal definition as groups/organizations intent in winning political power via elections and mobilizations — remain important for the transformation of democratic practice. Yet the authors themselves seem to have committed the mistake of focusing on generalized and small samples or cases. For one, they focus too much on political parties composed of the very political elites responsible in making the democratic space of their respective countries cramped, static and non-participatory. Remaining too entrenched on the assumption that parties always identify themselves as parties, they also seem to have neglected to look at the growing contemporary literature on social movement and political party transformations, where the interchangeability of functions between the two are becoming more apparent as the terrain of democratic struggle changes over time.

Where Tomsa says that "no party in Thailand or the Philippines appears to fit" the classification of mass-based parties, he conveniently neglected to include the struggles of peoples' organizations and ideological groups (mostly along the left of the political spectrum). This omission of studying popularly- and ideologically-organized parties, however minor they might be, deprives the studies of a more holistic and critical appreciation of how new political parties are actually being made to contest existing parties that continually breed disappointment among their electorates. Moreover, neglecting to look at emerging mass-based parties also limits our understanding of how clientelism, more and more, is becoming par for the course in organizing political parties themselves — if only because these mass-based parties themselves have their own specific forms and practices of clientelism as well, contrary to their propaganda.

In sum, the arguments, perspectives, and recommendations put forward in the book have only confirmed and repeated the cyclical arguments about how and why political parties remain contentious and unappreciated agents of political transformation. While academics and the general public will do well to look into the studies presented in the book as an introduction and review to the literature on political parties and clientelism, ground-breaking analyses of the future of parties and how political change might be advanced are yet to be made.

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**Hansley A. Juliano** graduated this 2013 with a Master of Arts in Political Science, major in Global Politics, from the Ateneo de Manila University. An independent researcher and former student journalist, he is a part-time lecturer in the Department of Political Science in the same university. His research interests include socio-political movements, political and economic development, as well as the changing contours of studies in literary criticism, history and philosophy. [Read more reviews by Hansley.](#)