Political Oppositions in Industrialising Asia

Garry Rodan (editor)

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One of the standard cliches of Asian politics is that economic growth and accompanying expansion of the middle class will inevitably result in a growth of civil society and a move away from authoritarianism towards liberal democracy. *Political Oppositions in Industrialising Asia* attempts to escape the limitations imposed by this assumption and to offer a offer a more rounded description of national politics in East and Southeast Asia. In his introduction Rodan makes two principal points. The first is that the assumption of liberal democracy as a teleological reference point produces a narrow focus on parliamentary oppositions and a neglect of other forms of opposition, most notably a variety of "new social movements". (An alternative reification of "Asian values" or a monolithic "Asian Culture", whether by regional leaders such as Lee Kuan Yew or theorists such as Huntingdon, is equally stultifying.) The second is that a sharp dichotomy between state and civil society conceals the complexities of the contested political terrain, especially when the conflict is couched in simplistic "zero-sum" terms and civil society (elements of which are as authoritarian as any state) is uncritically lauded.

Seven of the following chapters are broad surveys, by specialists, of opposition movements in individual countries: Thailand (Hewison), Singapore (Rodan himself), Malaysia (Jesudason), China (Chan), Indonesia (Aspinall), South Korea (Dalton and Cotton), and Taiwan (Rigger). They use the ideas set out by Rodan in the introduction, but place them in local context and offer frameworks of their own for understanding features unique to each country: the Malaysian construction of a "syncretic state" which uses religion, ethnicity, and control over segments of the economy to fragment possible opposition; in China the evolution of the Democratic Parties and entrepreneur organisations into a form of loyal opposition and the lack of any connection between elite dissidents and worker and peasant unrest; "mobilisational authoritarianism" in Taiwan, with incorporation of local elites into the ruling party through local electoral politics and state sponsorship of interest groups and organisations; and so on.

The other three chapters approach from different directions. Chapter two (Rodan and Hewison) traces the historical decline of the Left in southeast Asia and the ebb and flow of civil society. (It appears, somewhat oddly, to include armed revolutionary movements as part of civil society.) Chapter seven (Baogang) describes opposition movements amongst Chinese students and academics overseas. This provides a suggestive contrast to the other studies, since these movements are free from state control but at the same time lack engagement with broader society. And chapter nine (Heryanto) is an account of recent events in Indonesia (in particular the 1994 press bans) which demonstrate a weakening of the New Order hegemony — but without indicating a corresponding strength on the part of opposition movements.

Political Oppositions in Industrialising Asia is an important contribution to political theory and to debates about the future of the region. While the chapters provide support for Rodan's general thesis, however, they are not dependent on it and can perfectly well be read in isolation. As general introductions to opposition politics in individual countries, they should command an audience outside academia, amongst businessmen, diplomats, and anyone else who wants more analytical depth than they will find in popular accounts.

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