Political Change in Southeast Asia
Trimming the banyan tree
Michael R.J. Vatikiotis
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In the West industrialisation and new-found wealth catalysed political enlightenment and participatory democracy. The experience of Southeast Asia has been rather different. Rapid economic growth has not resulted in an even distribution of wealth, and progress towards participatory democracy has been slow. Strong governments hold sway over free markets supported by middle classes seemingly content to sacrifice gratification for collective stability. Some now argue that the Western model of political change is not applicable in the Southeast Asian context.

Michael R.J. Vatikiotis examines the contrast between the assumptions about political change based on the Western experience and the Southeast Asian reality. He argues that traditional concepts of power, which stress authoritarian values and paternalism, have not simply survived but have thrived during the postcolonial period despite pressures to Westernise. He points out that while the desire to preserve power has prompted local ruling elites to make exaggerated claims about ‘Asian’ values, the societies they govern are also finding ways of resisting tyranny.

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London and New York
For Chloe and Stefan
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The countries of Southeast Asia have undergone radical and remarkable changes in the decades since the end of the Pacific War in 1945. As their governments and people confront the uncertain future of the twenty-first century, the nature of impending political change is very much at issue driven as it will be by underlying economic and social change. Very much uncertain is the likely nature of that change. Will text-book democracy in its accepted Western sense become the new political reference point in place of a general authoritarianism justified in the name of social order and economic development? Or will an evident demand for greater participation by a proto-middle class be tempered and controlled in an acceptable manner by paternalistic leaderships espousing the virtues of good and strong government? These are the general questions which Michael Vatikiotis poses in this stimulating analysis of political change in Southeast Asia in which a number of conventional wisdoms about the road to democracy are vigorously contested.

Drawing on his considerable personal experience of living in and writing about Southeast Asia, Michael Vatikiotis asks ‘What kind of political culture will prevail at the dawn of a new century?’ He takes as his imaginative sub-title and theme the notion of ‘Trimming the banyan tree’. That tree, which is sacred to many within the region and beyond, is described as an apt metaphor for the process of political change in Southeast Asia. It is a common aphorism that nothing can grow under the banyan tree. At issue is governmental commitment to its trimming in a political sense and, if so, the extent to which a limited loosening of collective bonds which envelop society serves as a practical proposition compatible with the rising aspirations of succeeding generations with more than growing material appetites. Michael Vatikiotis has not set out
to defend the political status quo; nor some of the unwholesome practices of some regional governments. Rather, he is concerned in this volume to address realistically the complex subject of the likely pace and direction of political change drawing in particular, but not exclusively, on the experiences of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, the most developed of the Southeast Asian states. He argues that the gradual rather than revolutionary pace of democracy is allowing political elites to adapt to the needs of a more demanding society but not to abdicate power entirely. Indeed, he concludes that for some years to come only token rather than substantive political change will prevail. This book and its conclusion will make a powerful and even controversial contribution to the continuing debate about the relationship between economic and political change in a part of the world which the World Bank has included within its depiction of the East Asian miracle.

Michael Leifer
The germ of the idea for this book came to me in 1991, on a rainy day in Bangkok riding in the back of a taxi. I was passing a trendy cluster of jazz and blues bars frequented by young, middle-class Thai professionals on Sarasin road. One of the bars was called ‘Zest Zone’. It struck me how evocative the name of this bar, etched out in purple neon, was of contemporary Thailand—as well as so much of the more developed portion of Southeast Asia. ‘Zest Zone’ resonated as an emblem of the region’s dynamism and prosperity; the creativity of its youthful business community. It was clear to me that money was not just breeding prosperity; it was generating a mood of optimism and confidence that was changing the way Thais and other Southeast Asians were dealing with the outside world.

Fourteen years ago, when I arrived in Thailand as a young graduate student, the country defined itself as a developing country. I was treated as a prosperous visitor from a far away developed country where everything was so much ‘better’. Times have changed. Today, cohorts of job-hungry Europeans and Americans are streaming to Southeast Asia, where things are so much ‘better’ job-wise. The new rich of Southeast Asia are buying up companies and property in European and North American cities. A Thai company recently saved a grand old hotel in London from demolition; a Singaporean conglomerate has bought the Plaza Hotel in New York. An Indonesian businessman bought the famous Italian sports car company ‘Lamborghini’.

I consider myself fortunate to have witnessed for much of the past decade the material transformation of Southeast Asia. It’s a transition that could be seen, in global terms, as one of the hallmarks of the postwar era. The successful economies of Southeast Asia are already making projections for when the size
of their GDPs will exceed those of countries in Western Europe. In all the countries I have covered as a journalist—principally Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand—I have seen people prosper and succeed. Success has bred confidence. How will this confidence be channelled? To what end?

The more I thought about this, the more my optimism for the region’s future became tempered by the issue of political change. There are winners and losers in these dynamic economies. Disparities in wealth and social status are growing. These pressures from below sharpen the paradox of dynamic societies largely governed by strong forms of government. The region’s political culture does not seem, from a classical Western perspective, to be in step with the advancing dynamism of society—or the demands for equality. That led me to consider what it was about these political cultures, and the societies in which they thrive, that tolerates the paradox—or indeed whether a paradox exists. Contemporary Southeast Asia is not the crucible of social and political ferment that Cold War warriors once worried it might become. Yet there are clearly political and social tensions. What explains the region’s comparative stability in a period of rapid economic growth? I was further goaded by the debate that began in the early 1990s over the so-called clash of political values: was there an Asian way of governance, or was the region destined for parity with the Western liberal democratic model of government? Stripping away the rhetoric, I was struck by the strong vein of nationalism which runs through the debate over political culture in the region.

It also struck me that analysing political cultures—what constitutes the basis of the relationships between rulers and the ruled—was a better way to understand the region’s political dynamics. With the end of the Cold War, a conflict between political ideologies rooted in recent European history, it has become easier to identify political behaviour driven by more indigenous impulses. The role of history, culture and religion can be more clearly discerned now that we are no longer obsessed with the emotive political labels of the Cold War.

On the other hand, so much of the political debate in Southeast Asia has become entangled in the reordering of global geopolitics. Westerners are prone to claiming an ideological victory now that communism is defeated. Partly in reaction to this, Asians in general, and Southeast Asians in particular, have allowed
economic success to blind them to flaws in their own political cultures. As an impartial observer, my objective has not been to award merit, nor allow conscience to govern my analysis. This book tries to distil the realities of the region’s political cultures, generalising where possible, so that a more realistic picture of the region’s political future can be projected. In this sense I am offering more of a Chinese brush-stroke painting rather than a Balinese painting, which is characteristically full of minute details.

In that vein, it is possible, I think, to suggest that a basic tension informs political culture in Southeast Asia. On the one hand, strong government and popular support for legitimate leadership is a common characteristic of contemporary Southeast Asian political cultures, one that helps distinguish the region’s politics from the West. On the other hand, there is also a deeply rooted popular aversion to tyranny and bad government, and a long tradition of challenge to the political status quo when it proves unacceptable. The pace and manner of political change may seem at odds with Western norms, but it would be wrong to assume that people anywhere are naturally disposed to enduring tyranny and oppression. The form of freedom and democracy they crave is not necessarily identical with that practised in the West, but there is a growing desire to be treated as subjects and not objects of political life. (I use the term ‘West’ throughout the book, and this begs some explanation. I use it to refer to the major European powers, and North America, extending beyond that to the general geographical boundaries of what is generally termed ‘Western’ culture.)

Many people have shared their views with me on the subject of political culture and change. The preparation of this book spanned a period during which I was based in Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, and most recently Bangkok as a reporter with the Far Eastern Economic Review. It would be hard to mention everybody who has contributed to this book. However, I would like to record a debt of appreciation to some people with whom I have had a running debate, or asked specifically to contribute their views to this book over the past three years. In Indonesia: Mochtar Kusumaatmadja, General (ret’d) L.B. Moerdani, Abdurrahman Wahid, Marzuki Darusman, Nurcholis Madjid, Nasir Tamara, Jusuf Wanandi, Goenawan Mohammad, Nono Makarim, Fikri Jufri, Marsillam Simanjuntak, and Dewi Fortuna Anwar. In Malaysia: Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, Khalid Jaafar, Rustam
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Michael Vatikiotis
Bangkok, September 1995
Prologue

In May 1992, students, office workers and a sprinkling of young urban professionals took to the streets of Bangkok to demonstrate against the military-led government of General Suchinda Kraprayoon. They were angered by General Suchinda’s self-appointment as prime minister after the failure of his National Peacekeeping Council to appoint a civilian elected prime minister. In an apparently calculated response, the army fired on the demonstrators, leaving 52 confirmed dead and over 160 missing. It was the worst political violence the country had seen since the mid-1970s.

But Thailand has changed since then. Set against the affluence of modern Bangkok, the burning cars and overturned buses littering Rajdamnoen Avenue, the angry speeches and the army’s violent attempt to restore order looked like turning points in the country’s political development. Here at last, the middle class, considered the torchbearers of democracy in the region, was apparently asserting itself and demanding a say in government. Media reports portrayed the army confronted by the urban bourgeoisie wearing designer labels and toting mobile phones. To the surprise of the mostly young, bandanna and t-shirt-clad demonstrators the army caved in and the military-led government fell.

The outcome of the May 1992 disturbances in Bangkok appeared to offer concrete proof of Southeast Asia’s changing political culture: of a society now willing to question authority, resist authoritarian power politics and pave the way for broader participation in government. May 1992 in Bangkok was framed alongside the 1986 popular overthrow of the Marcos regime in the Philippines and the pro-democracy demonstrations in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square in 1989; a votive triptych on the altar of democracy.
Strip away the media hype, however, and the middle-class connection becomes less clear. More sober appraisals by leading Thai academics at the time say the middle-class composition of the mob was greatly exaggerated, and that their ability to influence the direction of political change has been somewhat overstated. In fact, at the height of the disturbances King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the world’s longest reigning monarch, discretely acted to restore order. Behind the scenes, his privy councillors brokered a settlement with the recalcitrant generals and played a decisive role in forming a civilian government. For many Thais the end of the biggest political upheaval since the mid-1970s was summed up by a televised image of General Suchinda alongside his prodemocracy adversary General Chamlong Srimuang; both men summoned to the palace on 21 May and supplicating the monarch while crouching at his feet. Three days later Suchinda resigned.

A year later, as Thailand’s elected civilian prime minister Chuan Leekpai struggled to cement the legacy of those few bloody days in the streets of Bangkok, another political culture was supposedly being recast in neighbouring Cambodia. The fragile peace accord between Cambodia’s warring factions struck after 13 years of civil war was only just holding up after UN-sponsored multiparty elections in May 1993. Instead of solidifying that peace with the pluralistic properties of a modern democracy, Cambodia went back in time to become, once again, a monarchy with Prince Norodom Sihanouk’s reaccession to the throne he gave up in 1955. The restored Cambodian monarchy is not nearly as influential—or politically effective—as the Thai throne, but King Sihanouk is credited with holding together a frail peace between competing political factions in the country.

Although not obviously connected, the two situations share a common thread; a link with the traditional past. In both Thailand and Cambodia, the end result of these political crises was not a revolutionary change of the political system. Neither the mass protests of 1992 directed against the military in Bangkok nor the UN-sponsored elections in Cambodia a year later, offered a complete solution to the political situations they addressed. Instead, society seemed to fall back on traditional forms of paternalistic leadership through the legitimising role of the monarchy. That a popular challenge to authority could be resolved in the 1990s through the mediation of an ancient rather than modern political institution begs intriguing questions about the
political cultures of Southeast Asia. What makes them so enduring and resistant to change? Why do ordinary people prefer firm leadership to participatory politics? For arguably the real issue was not what sort of new political system emerged from the chaos on the streets of Bangkok, or in the tattered villages of postwar Cambodia. What the ordinary citizen seemed to want was security, order, stability and a source of responsible leadership and authority.

As if to drive home the point, less than three years later popular opinion in Bangkok turned against the civilian elected government of ‘angels’ born of the May 1992 violence. By mid-1995, to cite a prominent Thai politician, people seemed ‘less interested in democracy and more interested in leadership’. Writing about Chuan Leekpai, whose government fell in May 1995, an editorial writer commented that ‘while there has been no doubt about Chuan’s clean lifestyle and honest principles, the public became dissatisfied with his hands-off management style and his lack of courage to tackle problems head on’. Chuan was defeated by a coalition of old-style politicians, many of whom had sided with the military in 1992. But then traditionally it has mattered little to the Thai or Cambodian merchant or farmer whether a government calls itself democratic so long as he or she feels its weight as little as possible and benefits from its security as much as possible—a pragmatic immunity to ideology often lost on outside observers.

Those bent on detecting the emergence of Western-style civic values in Southeast Asia might question this interpretation of two recent milestones in Southeast Asian political history. To those imbued with the prevailing universalistic notions of Western social science monarchy is associated with feudalism and the trappings of aristocracy (never mind the fact that Europe’s oldest democracies developed, and continue to thrive, under monarchies—in Britain, the Netherlands and Sweden). Few indeed would credit the ancient indigenous institution of semi-divine monarchy, albeit recast in a constitutional mould, with either the desire or capacity to protect the freedom of ordinary citizens. Surely the solution lies in erecting representative institutions more accountable to society? Will this be the case? Is Southeast Asia’s political development on a convergent course, ultimately destined to become a haven of Western-style liberal democratic values? If not, what kind of political culture will prevail at the dawn of the new century? This
seems to be the most relevant question about the region’s future beyond the period of remarkable economic growth of the 1990s.

The ten countries of Southeast Asia will embark on the new century with more wealth and confidence than many areas of the post-Cold War world. Their economies have enjoyed growth rates of between 6 per cent and 8 per cent a year for over a decade. They mostly enjoy enviable political stability. And, with the exception of China’s assertion of sovereignty in the South China Sea, there is no sign of regional conflict on the horizon. There seems to be no question of the region’s potential measured in these terms. Where questions are raised, however, they concern the complex relationship between state and society.

Western observers feel most comfortable addressing this issue from a theoretical viewpoint. In theory free trade and an open market are considered the two keystones of sustained growth. The economic momentum created by the thumb and forefinger of Adam Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ is credited with stimulating varying degrees of pressure for political change in almost all the ten countries in Southeast Asia over the past decade. This has given rise to the notion that without changes to the prevailing political culture further economic growth could be stunted. In practice, the theory is supposed to work like this:

as national wealth accumulates, citizens start to recognise their options, and see less reason for delayed gratification. Clearly they will want more material consumption, and as they start to conceive a better life they are also likely to want more civil liberty and political freedom.

By this reasoning, the expansion of the middle class is expected to fuel demands for more popular sovereignty. The assumption is that a nascent bourgeoisie wants the freedom to influence decisions in the marketplace for themselves because as individuals they now have more of a stake in the economy, either through enterprise or property ownership. It is commonly expected that these middle-class political urges run up against established ruling elites in no hurry to surrender their power. In response to demands for more popular sovereignty these elites set about reinforcing the ideological and economic buttresses of state power by claiming distinct indigenous values have fostered economic progress. The theory predicts that they won’t succeed:
the very economic growth which the authoritarians have used to justify their rule is rapidly creating an educated Asian middle class whose members do care about such supposedly western notions as individual rights and press freedoms, and who are prepared to protest publicly against government corruption, incompetence and authoritarianism.\textsuperscript{5}

The problem with this well-worn conceptual framework is that it is based on a simplistic and even subjective interpretation of actual events. Southeast Asia has not been kind to the neat predictions of Western social science. Half a century ago, anthropologists found that the highly structured dynamics of ethnic relations, which pioneering fathers of the discipline established working among tribal societies in Africa, became blurred and transient in the more fluid plural complexity of upland Burma and Thailand.\textsuperscript{6} The Nuer of North Africa were and remain the Nuer. But a Shan from Burma can become a Thai, and then become Shan again.

Much later, social scientists came in search of the capitalist middle-class affluent, predicting the abandonment of primordial attachments to paternalism and religion. But like the mercurial Shan, the Southeast Asian capitalist has many faces. The middle-class affluence he or she is supposed to represent may be susceptible to liberal impulses, and therefore prone to confrontation with the state. Equally though, affluence can help reinforce primordial traditions of patronage and hierarchy on which the authoritarian state thrives. The middle classes of Thailand or Indonesia may have acquired a level of wealth that implies they have a bigger stake in the national future, but they have not shown much inclination to stand up to the established ruling elite. Political reality in Southeast Asia is amorphous and often defies categorisation. As the Australian academic Richard Robison suggests, there is a complex ambiguity about the middle classes encountered in the region: ‘The middle class has neither been internally consistent in its political stance nor unambiguously democratic in its actions.’\textsuperscript{7}

The free market promoters say that wealth comes from people, not governments. What they miss in Southeast Asia is a traditional belief that good leadership and strong government is necessary to protect people so they can produce the wealth. How else do you explain the fact that in affluent Bangkok opinion polls consistently ranked former caretaker prime minister Anand Panyarachun as the
people’s first choice? Anand, a former bureaucrat turned businessman, was neither an elected member of parliament, nor the leader of a political party. Unencumbered by either precondition to holding office, Anand served as interim prime minister on two occasions during 1991–2. In that time he initiated economic reforms which helped boost Thailand’s growth rate in the mid-1990s.

If preferring unelected to elected leaders sounds like a paradox, take the following apparently contradictory remarks from three of the wealthiest and most successful businessmen in Southeast Asia: when asked what it was about China that ensured its future stability, Dhanin Chearavanont, the chairman of Thailand’s Charoen Pokphand Group cited strong government and the ability of the government to leave businessmen to their own devices.8 Another successful Chinese businessman, Gordon Wu from Hong Kong, described the legacy of US colonialism in the Philippines as the most egregious because it saddled the country with American-style democracy.9 Tun Daim Zainuddin was finance minister of Malaysia, presiding over the sweeping liberalisation of the economy in the late 1980s. In early 1993, he said that ‘suitable interventionist measures’ were required at varying levels ‘to ensure that the capitalistic system can still operate successfully’. Daim concluded that ‘it is highly improbable that a purely free market mechanism will fulfil the development objectives aspired to by the developing nations of Asia’.10 Finally, in its 1994 annual report, the Asian Development Bank concluded that the growth of the middle class is likely to have a tremendous effect on economic and social patterns of consumption but that:

Perhaps the only thing that is sure is that as incomes rise, the pattern of Asian development is unlikely to follow that of the west in any simple way; and where convergence does occur the paths followed in getting there may be different.11

Theories claiming that economic growth is the harbinger of political change generally assume that some form of representative democracy is the ultimate political destination. There may well be a linkage between advancing prosperity and political transformation. But will the changes necessarily produce text-book democracies? That tends to be the assumption which lurks behind questions most frequently asked about the region’s political future:
When will Burma’s military junta be replaced by a civilian democratic government? When will Vietnam’s Communist Party give up power? When, for that matter, will Indonesia’s military disengage from politics? These are all relevant questions in the prevailing Western theoretical context, and the answer is commonly assumed to be soon—or not soon enough. But what if reality is more fuzzy?

What if Burma’s generals meet the democratic opposition half way: go into civilian politics and prolong their grip on power, encouraging the spread of material prosperity, but putting full democracy on hold? That is what Indonesia’s generals did after 1966, and is one possible interpretation of why Burma’s military rulers suddenly released pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi from 6 years under house arrest in July 1995. ‘I have always felt I could work with the army’, she told *Time* magazine soon after her release. What if Vietnam’s communist cadres yield power to the military and not to more participatory democracy? The Indonesian army’s dual political and civilian role may be changing, but shows no sign of breaking up. The army draws strength from visceral fears of divisive social and religious threats to stability. Current realities and realistic projections for the future suggest a pattern of political change that is far from definitive. But change there will be, and it would be wrong to deny that aspects of it will foster freedom and democracy. The form and degree of these ideals may, however, vary greatly.

In social and cultural terms, Southeast Asian states have demonstrated the capacity for as much inertia as change over the centuries. Eras, dynasties, intruders came and went. Each left their mark but failed to effect a radical transformation of society. Even the arrival of modern universal religions such as Hinduism, Theravada Buddhism and Islam failed to eradicate traditional beliefs, which instead were absorbed and accommodated in a way which diluted their orthodoxy, and—as a useful by-product—promoted tolerance. Such a generalisation risks being taken as a denial of progress, when in fact it demonstrates one of the key sources of the region’s resilience and stability. The high degree of elasticity involved in maintaining the cultural status quo allows elements of tradition and renewal to blend and interact, but rarely to clash. For most of the region, non-confrontational, gradual change has helped make Southeast Asia a stable platform on which
prosperity can flourish, even if it makes the task of charting social and political change rather like watching grass grow.

Yet the focus for the 1990s and beyond, will be on the region’s social and political environment. Not just because human rights and democracy are firmly on the agendas of the region’s economic partners in the West. If anything there is a growing perception in the region that Western influence is set to decline. Charting political change is important because the risks affecting the region’s future seem to lie in this area. Economic prophets of doom predicting the loss of economic momentum in Southeast Asia sound like Philistines these days. Asia as a whole kept on growing through the recession that hit the developed world in the early 1990s. But history has conspired to make the end of the millennium a period of potential political flux for Southeast Asia.

There will be the uncertainty of succession after long periods of unquestionably harsh leadership in Burma under General Ne Win and his subordinate successors in the State Law and Order Restoration Council; Indonesia under President Suharto; Malaysia under Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, and Thailand, where succession to the throne is considered a far bigger issue than which political party is in power. Singapore also faces the same challenge, if one takes a broader view of former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s role as ‘Senior Minister’. Being very much the father of Singapore as well as one of the region’s senior generation leaders, his passing will close a political chapter in the island republic’s history. Vietnam’s communist party, at some point, will reach an ideological crossroads once the current generation of nationalist leaders fade away.

Once these succession problems are resolved—smoothly or otherwise—there will be other challenges. Nearly two decades of sustained economic growth has left a host of moral and social issues for the new generation of leaders in the region to deal with. Local non-governmental organisations are urging governments not to ignore the impact of growth on the environment, community and human rights. Increasingly, the concerns of local, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are finding a regional voice through a growing web of transnational organisations. Living standards may have improved overall, but the fruits of growth have not always been distributed equitably. In Indonesia, for instance, the World Bank notes that absolute poverty has fallen from about 60 per cent of the population to around 14 per cent
the past three decades. But the Bank adds that ‘instead of
generalised poverty, poverty in Indonesia is now increasingly
localised by geographical location, occupation, household size,
age, gender and other characteristics’. In most countries of the
region, the rich have grown richer while the poor have become in
relative terms poorer.

As well as the social polarisation accompanying growth, the
social and material changes accompanying rapid urbanisation have
provoked spiritual and cultural alienation. This spiritual loss is
harder to gauge because it doesn’t stare at you like a road-side
beggar outside a shiny glass skyscraper. But if you look more
closely at the snooker bars and shopping malls, the question marks
haunting the lives of the urban youth are palpable: who are we?; where
do we come from?; and where are we going? The cultural
alienation bred by rapid growth crops up commonly as a literary
theme. In Thai novelist Khammaan Khonkhai’s *The Teachers of
Mad Dog Swamp* the central character, the teacher Piya, confronts
the alienation of the countryside from Bangkok society. In
Malaysian novelist K.S.Maniam’s *In a Far Country* a village son
goes to the big city and becomes convinced that ‘Progress was
another name for loneliness, for coldness between people.’

Urban growth has been one of the more remarkable phenomena
in modern Southeast Asia, helping to turn once predominantly
rural, agrarian cultures into mainly urbanised ones in a matter of
two or three decades. But for all the material improvements in
standards of living, it is often easy to forget the impact on societies
that are traditionally tightly-knit and community oriented. Instead
of relying on predictable networks of relatives and neighbours, the
city dweller struggles to build more impersonal networks based on
the workplace. In some ways, the adjustment involved may be less
a matter of how society is governed, than how it thinks of itself in
religious and cultural terms. Not all religions consider that
consumer driven materialism is the ultimate goal of development,
nor are some indigenous cultures so easily tailored to fit concepts
like meritocracy and individual enterprise without wrenching them
apart.

If there is to be a social reaction to the rapid growth of the last
few years, some comfort can be drawn from the fact that most
governments are only too aware of the potential cultural and
spiritual backlash material progress has invited. Under pressure to
face up to these challenges, conservative ruling elites have not
retreated behind the ramparts. In some cases they are slowly coming to terms with the need to share power and grant more personal freedom to their more prosperous, better travelled, and better educated people. Aspirations are vastly expanding for people who just a generation ago would have been lucky enough to be clothed, fed and given a basic education. Yet the infrastructure of social well-being has not grown at the same pace as overall economic growth. Schools and universities are becoming overcrowded and standards are not improving greatly, as indicated by the continuing flow of students abroad. Governments not accustomed to spending much on welfare beyond the provision of basic needs must now think about how to satisfy the more complex demands of a more developed society. By adopting a gradual approach to these challenges, governments help prevent violent social upheavals and maintain the conditions for economic growth. Of course, they also perpetuate their existence.

From a political perspective, this acceptance of the need for gradual socio-economic and political change undoubtedly helps camouflage and sustain authoritarian regimes. Typically, a leader with no intention of relinquishing power makes speeches acknowledging the need for political reform and social justice—but works quietly behind the scenes to ensure that reforms are either stalled or tailored to suit the ends of retaining power. Compromises and half-measures prevail in the field of political reform. Thus ‘openness’ became an official by-word in Indonesia in the late 1980s, even if there was no sign of any fundamental change to a political system which frowns upon dissent. Even this limited official tolerance of openness shrank considerably in the mid-1990s, as the government closed down three popular news magazines and prosecuted journalists who formed an independent journalists union. In Malaysia, some elements in the government acknowledge that a law which permits the detention of individuals for up to two years without trial is anachronistic, yet the state clings to stringent internal security laws that were introduced under colonial rule. In Singapore’s intensely controlled political microclimate, a younger generation of politicians have been brought on, but it is no easier for opposition parties to thrive.

Those who advocate a gradual pace of change appear to have time on their side. Even without the weight of state control over the media, popular awareness about modern forms of democratic government, though growing, would still seem to be
limited to a narrow spectrum of urban intellectuals. Indonesia’s middle class may only comprise less than 10 per cent of the population—rising as high as 15 per cent in urban areas. Of this limited cohort, an even smaller percentage is actively engaged in political activities, or has been exposed to alternative political systems. The middle class in Indonesia is also a privileged class. In any one year, there might be as many as 10,000 Indonesians studying abroad—not all of whom will become convinced that their political rights are being abused after they return and find prime opportunities in the private or state sectors. In Thailand, intellectuals speak about a rural-urban divide in politics. A small minority of city people want political parties to present concrete policies and political leadership; but the majority of votes are cast in rural areas where traditional patronage means that personality means more than policy and votes are still bought for cash.

Popular participation in the debate about political change has yet to achieve a critical mass in Southeast Asia. Ironically, the more politically enlightened among the middle classes of the region are the Western educated sons and daughters of the narrow elite which hold the reins of political and economic power. Many of them are easily won over by the establishment to which they ultimately belong. Galloping rates of literacy and education, which should go some way towards spreading new political ideas, have not succeeded in eroding ingrained cultural acceptance of strong leadership and control—especially when it offers common security and a measure of wealth and prosperity the people have only just begun to enjoy. ‘Here, people don’t talk about civil liberties, they talk about creature comforts’, complains a Malaysian opposition MP.13

THE REGION AND ITS COUNTRIES

Of course, to generalise about ten countries in a region as diverse as Southeast Asia is fraught with difficulty. To attempt a composite polaroid snapshot of political development would seem to be even more hazardous. We might begin by defining the framework for generalisation, and identifying some anomalies.

The region defined here as Southeast Asia comprises ten countries stretching from the borders of India and Bangladesh to the borders of China. Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam are commonly described as the states of mainland
Southeast Asia; Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia straddle the islands to the South. The Philippines sits out on the margins, remote from the rest of the region in more ways than one. As a whole, the region has a population of some 470 million people, growing in aggregate at a rate of between 2 per cent and 4 per cent a year.

Much of the material in this book is drawn from what could be described as the four core countries of more developed Southeast Asia. They are Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. These four countries have the highest growth rates, the highest rate of domestic savings and have been the recipients of most of the region’s foreign investment for the past two decades. These countries will double their level of per capita GNP by the year 2005, putting Singapore almost on a par with Japan.

It is here, in these four countries, that the pace of economic growth has invited the most speculation about the pace of political change. But what of the rest of the region?

The Philippines celebrates 100 years of independence from Spain and latterly the United States in 1998, an historical benchmark that should remind the rest of the region how long that country has called itself a republic and a democracy. For despite a long period of American tutelage (1898–1946), a brutal Japanese occupation, the authoritarian excesses of the Marcoses and flirtation with military rule their overthrow involved, the Philippines has kept faith with its inherited hybridised Spanish-American culture. Unlike the rest of Southeast Asia, the Philippines knew effective European rule for longer, and more importantly

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Sources: World Bank, 1995 and Asia Pacific Profiles, Australian National University
before any form of indigenous concept of statehood had fully evolved. Filipino statehood therefore draws heavily on the 400 year colonial experience which created its territorial frame.

Jose Almonte, who is President Fidel Ramos’ national security adviser, argues that in a region of strong states, the Philippine state is uniquely weak. Although many Filipinos would proudly point to the strong institutions of democratic rule inherited from their former American rulers, Almonte offers another explanation: ‘Our economic system is more Latin American than East Asian in the way it has concentrated power in a few families.’ In the modern Philippines, the top 5.5 per cent of all landowning families own 44 per cent of arable land, and as little as 100 families control all elective positions at the national level.

But for all the pride Filipinos have in their democracy with all its imperfections, the price they have paid has been their marginalisation from the region’s cultural mainstream of politics. Recent attempts to remedy the situation have only etched out the differences more clearly. When foreign secretary Raul Manglapus tried to entice Burma out of its shell to talk about human rights and democracy in 1992, he was politely told to mind his own business. When Lee Kuan Yew tried to tell Filipinos that their democracy was bad for business, the venerable former prime minister was, somewhat less politely, told that no level of prosperity would tempt Filipinos to trade their freedom—however imperfectly it is shared. The difference in attitude has brought the Philippines into low intensity diplomatic conflict with its regional neighbours. In May 1994, Indonesia protested against the holding of a human rights conference in Manila on the disputed territory of East Timor. Almost a year later, the government of the Philippines came close to severing diplomatic ties with Singapore over the island republic’s hanging of a Filipina maid convicted of murder.

The tiny oil-rich sultanate of Brunei Darulsalam is considered another anomaly for the purposes of this study. Granted independence by the British in 1984, Brunei is the only modern Southeast Asian state which claims to follow the social and political precepts of medieval Malay society. Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah rules his 280,000 subjects in every sense of the term. He is head of the religion, military commander in chief and prime minister—in that order. The only semblance of political ideology is a creed promoting the interlocking roles of the Malay race, Islamic
religion and the monarchy. Perhaps more of an anomaly than the feudal character of the Sultan’s rule is the sheer wealth of the state. Brunei’s hydrocarbon wealth, and the careful management of the revenues, notionally gives each of the Sultanate’s subjects an average per capita income of US$ 19,000, one of the highest in the world. There are calls for political change, muted demands for an elected assembly and more freedom of speech from a small group of intellectuals and dissidents linked to an attempted revolt against the monarchy in the 1960s. But with such a sustainable basis of wealth, Brunei is unlikely to experience popular pressure for change.

This leaves those states (Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Laos, Singapore and Vietnam) whose political evolution has been influenced by long periods of precolonial sovereignty, as well as subjugation to European rule (except Thailand). The political cultures of these states are harder to fathom. Most have experienced political upheavals in the past five decades registering intense pressures for political change, yet ultimately very little has changed. In actual fact, despite the rhetoric of democratic reform in Thailand, or public commitment to a more open system by Indonesia’s leadership, their political cultures remain largely unchanged.

Thailand’s elected civilian government supports the greater application of the rule of law, but it has yet to free itself from a powerful blend of paternalistic bureaucratic, military and business elite interests. Whereas once it was the army which drew criticism, now people are becoming disenchanted with the money-backed bossism of provincial politicians and their business cronies. Instead of looking to the army, which has retreated from the political field since 1992, more politically conscious urban voters are turning to successful businessmen, viewing their corporate and technical expertise as valid credentials for national leadership. Some fear the trend will see the abuse of political power in the interests of big business and, eventually, the army’s return to politics to clean up the mess. ‘One day, someone will get up in parliament and call for the army to intervene’, sighed a retired general.

In the 1990s, Indonesians wait out the long rule of a president who has blended Javanese traditional culture with military might to fashion a monolithic power-base. Most intellectuals expect his successor to be cut from the same military as well as cultural cloth. For ordinary Indonesians, the image of
their smiling paternalistic president is tarred by the stories they hear about the extensive business activities of his family. Yet even the wealth of his children is mitigated by popular respect for a leader who saved Indonesia from a bloody period of internecine feuding and national bankruptcy at the end of founding president Sukarno’s rule.

Singapore has been governed by a single political party since independence. Under the People’s Action Party, order and stability are given a higher priority than political freedom. In the words of Singapore’s former prime minister, now senior minister, Lee Kuan Yew the system he has helped shape envisages: ‘society as No. 1, and the individual, as part of society, as No. 2’. Political opposition is criticised in the government-controlled media for not serving the public interest, and therefore makes a minimal showing at the polls—even though the popular vote for the PAP has fallen in recent years. Despite tacit acknowledgment by the establishment of the need to encourage more popular participation in government, Singapore’s leaders make it clear that they won’t be changing the system overnight. By being vocal about the merits of a collective society where the rights of the individual are subjugated to obligations to the state, Singapore has placed itself at the forefront of the debate over universal human and political values. Yet here and in neighbouring Malaysia, where a strong-willed Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad shares a similar view, well organised and, by many standards, reasonably fair elections are held on a regular basis under the semblance of the rule of law; and the government wins a convincing two-thirds majority.

For states like Vietnam and Burma, which are only now emerging from long periods of internal turmoil, the pace of political change could be that much slower. Both countries are eager to catch up with their more developed neighbours in economic terms. On the political side of the equation their governments are less enthusiastic about what this spells for the future of strong, centralised state control. It’s a tough balancing act, one that Vietnam’s communist party General secretary Do Muoi suggested in July 1994 involved industrialising and modernising within ‘the framework of a modern economy’, while at the same time avoiding ‘individualism, disorder and violation of state law and order’.16
CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

What explains the persistence of these seemingly dichotomous situations lies very much at the heart of this study. Why is it that states considered potential powder kegs, like Indonesia and more recently Burma, fizzle rather than explode? Political systems which seem threatened by apparently anachronistic systems of authority preside over economies which look increasingly robust. People expected not to tolerate much more state control, bend like the proverbial bamboo. What does this resistance to political change tell us about the region? Perhaps that continuity and resistance to change are innate characteristics of the political culture not easily pushed aside by the theoretical notions of a global village.

It would be wrong, however, to deduce from this observation that today’s Southeast Asian states are hidebound and unchanging. In fact, the cultures they harbour are highly adaptable, constantly absorbing and reshaping external influences to suit their own conditions. This is perhaps where the region has suffered too much from comparison with what is commonly termed ‘East’ or ‘Northeast Asia’. It is fashionable these days to talk about the ‘Asia-Pacific region’, or simply ‘Asia’. Drawing out Southeast Asia’s distinctive characteristics has not been easy. Many Southeast Asian scholars in the West are reluctant to define common themes in the region because of its awesome ethnic and cultural diversity. Yet by this same argument Europe should be, and perhaps is becoming, impossible to envisage as a borderless union.

There are marked differences between East Asia and Southeast Asia. In China and Japan, Western cultural influence collided with monolithic and largely homogeneous imperial traditions which embraced value systems predating concepts which Westerners consider universal. If the Chinese today refer to English as a ‘minor’ language, what must they make of Adam Smith? China has been slow to adapt, and continues to experience a painful process of integration with the rest of the world. One day China may be strong enough to claim that the rest of the world should adapt to its own standards. Japan, an island state with a continental mindset, went for an awkward grafting of Western ideas on to a rigid indigenous cultural framework, leaving the Japanese and those who deal with them equally confused about what they are trying to be. Japan’s influence in the region is also
constrained by memories of the Pacific War; memories that die hard despite the passage of half a century, numerous official expressions of remorse, and lately an apology of sorts.

Southeast Asia’s cultural evolution has always been eclectic, reflecting the diverse origins of its people and the plethora of external influences exerted on the region through the medium of trade. Indigenous languages are shot through with foreign loanwords. In the middle ages, Malay and Portuguese were lingua francas: today, the English language is recognised as an important medium for business; tomorrow Chinese may take its place. Modern politics has drawn on an even broader cultural field. Indonesia’s Sukarno cited Thomas Jefferson and Karl Marx to prop up rhetoric aimed at impressing the world and suppressing his people. Malaysia’s Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad is at home with Naisbitt and Drucker, yet he co-authored (with maverick Japanese Diet member Shintaro Ishihara) a book calling on Asians to reject Western values. Perhaps this eccentrically eclectic approach reflects a diplomatic tradition of playing one external influence off against another in a bid to preserve political and cultural sovereignty. Thailand, for example, spent much of its history embracing foreign ideas simply to keep foreigners at arms length. Nevertheless, it is important not to underestimate the strong impulse in South East Asian cultures to claim an indigenous path to development.

Economic and political change

Sustained economic growth is breeding self-confidence and a desire to become less dependent on the West for capital and technology. While the volume of exports to major Western markets remains important, the volume of intraregional trade is also increasing. Exports from Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines to the Asia-Pacific region increased by over 30 per cent in the period 1990 to 1992. By the end of the decade over half the region’s trade will be concentrated in the Asia-Pacific region. The reality may still be that traditional Western markets and investment remain vital to the region’s economic health; but the prospect of reduced dependency on traditional markets is beginning to have an impact on policy. Thailand’s trade relationship with the United States looked very one-sided when Thailand relied on quotas and trade privileges granted by the US government. But as the volume
of Thailand’s exports to its fellow ASEAN countries reached the same level as its exports to the US in the mid-1990s, Thai officials began to talk about putting the relationship on a more equal footing.

At the same time, the growing prosperity of the regional market has fast begun to erode the bargaining positions of Western multinationals, many of which started looking at the region less as a place to dabble, and more as an absolutely vital place to be. The buoyancy of regional markets in the 1990s and the liquidity of its corporations have Western investors queuing up for a slice of the pie. This is no longer a market for pioneers and risk-takers; it is a market everybody has to be in. Even though the governments of more advanced states like Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore started to worry about rising costs of production, and the consequent erosion of their competitive advantage to foreign investors, this concern was balanced by the low-cost promise of emerging markets in Indochina and Burma. Overall, Southeast Asia remained the brightest spot in the global economic firmament in the mid-1990s.

The confidence bred of economic success has had a profound impact on perceptions of political change, at least in the minds of political elites in the region. For if the systems they preside over can sustain high levels of growth for so long, it is but a short step to claiming a set of unique values and questioning whether the West has the sole patent for political rectitude. If there is a defining tone about the last decade of the twentieth century in this region, it is a desire to stand on its own two feet; a final exorcism of the ghosts of the colonial past.

Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet of Vietnam declared that the country aimed to ‘learn but not copy’ from outside how to open up its economy. Vietnam, together with fellow economic laggard Burma, are more inclined to learn from their Asian neighbours rather than from the West. Two years after the UN-sponsored election in Cambodia, co-prime minister Norodom Ranaridh declared that Westera-style democratic governance was an inappropriate model for the country to adopt at its present stage of development. Shunning purely democratic models of government, the ruling elites of these emerging economies looked to their neighbours for guidance on how to modernise society without losing control over it. Hence Burma’s interest in the Indonesian army’s dual civilian and military role.
The subtle blending of acquired ideas with tradition, sometimes makes it hard to distinguish one from the other, or can be mistaken for unprogressive inertia. Hence the reason why Southeast Asia has long been characterised as a cauldron of diversity defying a common identity. The legacy of this over-stressed divarication has unfortunately helped breed the contemporary perception of the region as either immutable, or dependent on external stimuli for change. From here it is but a short step to asserting moral superiority, something which most people of Southeast Asia experienced under colonial rule. With questions that sound like ‘now that you have a developed economy, when will you develop a mature political system’, some may be wondering if colonial attitudes have really been expunged.

This study tries to approach the issue of political change with a more open mind. It argues that the gradual rather than revolutionary pace of democratisation in the region is allowing political elites to adapt to the needs of a more demanding society—but not to abdicate power entirely. This suggests that for some years to come only token rather than substantive change will prevail. A Singaporean official once described this measured, cautious approach to political change as ‘trimming the banyan tree’.

The banyan is a sturdy tree with long hanging branches offering ample shade. In many parts of Southeast Asia the tree is considered sacred, often planted in the grounds of Hindu or Buddhist temples. Its political significance stems from the ancient practice of using its protective shade as a place of teaching or supplication. In Thailand, monks still teach beneath venerable banyan trees. In the Javanese tradition, petitioners with a grievance would sit under the banyan to signal a desire for an audience with the ruler. In modern Indonesia, the banyan tree is the symbol of the government-backed Golkar party. The banyan tree is perhaps an apt metaphor for the process of political change in the region and its impact on society—it is said that nothing can grow under the banyan tree. For not only are ruling elites unwilling to yield their grip on power but also they are only prepared to see a limited loosening of the collective bonds which envelop society like the many overhanging branches of the banyan tree. In Southeast Asia there is a fine balance between what some may consider the keystone of social order, and others as a hindrance to the assertion of individual rights.

Finding the correct level is no easy task as conflicting arguments are loading up on both sides of the scales. Some argue that strong
government in Southeast Asia has been conspicuously successful. Take away liberal concerns for intellectual freedom and the rights of the individual, and you have a form of benign dictatorship in many countries which has undisputedly elevated living standards beyond expectations. Stability and prosperity have bred confidence and a conviction that the system works. Some countries are even selling their brand of strong government. Singapore has tried for some years to convince its neighbours that firm control over the media is best for everyone. Malaysian media entrepreneurs are trading their knowledge of how to run a pro-government newspaper in the emerging media markets of Indochina. Singapore is advising Vietnam and Burma on how to reform their economies and promote trade; Thailand wants to help mediate between Rangoon and Burma’s ethnic minorities. Again, confidence is breeding self-assurance, and a conviction about the way things are done in the region.

Some of this salesmanship is bearing fruit. When the leaders of Burma’s junta visited Indonesia in late 1993 they came away impressed by the military’s dual civil political and military roles. A senior Indonesian military officer observed that what impressed the Burmese was the way the ‘dual function’ kept a cork on popular pressures for change while fostering economic development. Sure enough, when the Burmese junta sat down in late 1994 to deliberate how to change its spots, one of the proposals was for an Indonesian-style legislature in which the military retains a quarter of the seats. ‘The SLORC [State Law and Order Restoration Council—the name of the 21-member military junta] appears to be looking toward an Indonesian future’, suggests Burma specialist David Steinberg, ‘a military dominated regime that appears externally to be civilian but in which power is clearly in the hands of the military establishment’.18

Strong government in the region has arguably become more entrenched: shored up on one side by well-oiled state machinery, and on the other by the acquiescence bred by increasing wealth and social well-being. In the ranks of the middle class there is a tendency to accept strong government and leadership as a means of preserving their new found wealth and security. There are precious few signs of dissent in the luxurious leafy housing developments springing up on the outskirts of Jakarta. Although some theorists have predicted that the middle classes will shoulder the burden of pressing for political reform, the principal source of
discontent seems to be the dispossessed under classes. Poor farmers and slum-dwellers are incensed by the wealth they see accumulating in the hands of the middle classes. To protect themselves from the anger of the less-privileged, the middle classes seem happy to see that government remains strong, and above all provides the leadership needed to preserve social and economic stability.

There are varying degrees of social discontent, but as we shall see later on, this is not always directed against the concept of strong government so much as at the way it is abused. On the whole, capitalism in the Southeast Asian context is breeding passive contentment faster than classical sociological theory predicts. And since the more developed Southeast Asian states no longer have to rely on foreign, usually Western aid, they can afford to thumb their noses at their critics.

Generally speaking, the Cold War and a corporate thirst for lucrative overseas contracts allowed these states to flaunt their democratic imperfections with impunity for 20 years. But this changed when the West won the Cold War. Freedom of the individual is not a debatable matter in the eyes of Western governments which once considered the non-communist states of the region a model of capitalist values when they confronted the ‘Red’ threat. With communism possibly consigned to history’s waste pile, the West, and in particular the United States under President Bill Clinton, began to look for a new global role. Insisting on conformity to its own standards of political freedom as a fundamental basis for relations in the post-Cold War world was a logical follow-up. This view has brought Southeast Asia into what amounts to an ideological conflict with the West, as arguments over what constitutes freedom dwell on the difference between Eastern and Western values and traditions.

Social and cultural forces

It may be dangerously deterministic to draw too fine a distinction between East and West. But equally it would be naïve to think that Western political philosophy is alone in promoting notions of freedom and popular sovereignty. There are other social and cultural forces moulding the political landscape of Southeast Asia. They may not be those commonly associated with the development of modern states, but they are familiar agents of change in the
regional context. Religion has always played a dual role in the societies under consideration here. Religion has helped to legitimise ruling elites and define national identity on the one hand, but also offered an outlet for protest against the burden of tyranny and oppression. After almost half a century of modernisation and nation-building, during which governments did their best to bottle up or co-opt the popular appeal of religious belief, the side-effects of sustained growth—the widening gap between rich and poor, alienation in the urban environment, and overall moral decline—are generating social tensions. More importantly, in the absence of effective mass-based political organisations, these popular grievances are finding expression through a revival of populist as opposed to state-backed religion.

Reacting to the assault on their legitimacy, both from Western derived and indigenous sources of protest, the region’s ruling elites have resorted to claiming distinctive moral and social values to shore up their authority. The formulation of core values with the help of corporatist state ideologies has exaggerated the collective, disciplined nature of Southeast Asian societies to help preserve strong government and defend the system against its critics. In the process there is a danger that the constructive balance between individual freedom and collective compliance inherent in the traditional political culture could be lost. By forcing normative aspects of morality, religion and political culture into strictly-defined areas of behaviour, there is a danger that some of the tolerance and flexibility of Southeast Asian society may also be lost.

The wider geopolitical context is going to be an important factor in shaping the post-modern political landscape of Southeast Asia. Some analysts consider that the greatly feared, but unspoken threat of a hegemonistic China is accelerating moves towards regional integration in Southeast Asia. It would certainly be optimistic to assume that efforts to forge a free trade area, closer security ties and an ambitious communion of all ten Southeast Asian states, stems from the conviction that shared commercial interests and a European-style union is around the corner. The existing grouping of seven states under the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has spent the past quarter of a century crafting a thin veneer of common interest and cooperation, mainly in the interests of avoiding conflict with one another. Now there are important external stimuli to enhanced
cooperation: the perceived threat of a regional superpower in the neighbourhood; declining confidence in the countervailing balance of power offered by the United States; and the pressures to conform to a global system of political and economic behaviour.

Whatever the motives, the fact that these states will be thrown closer together must have an impact on the social, economic and political shape of the region. It will tease out common, shared beliefs but also allow them to scrutinise each other more closely, and comment on each other’s affairs. The seven ASEAN states (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines) have long cherished a principle of non-interference in one another’s affairs, and expect solidarity from one member state when another is criticised by an outside power. But in a more transparent regional environment, there are bound to be conformist pressures. All the more so when all the former communist states of Indochina and long-isolated Burma eventually join the ASEAN club.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity is also a very important component of the region’s economic and commercial tradition. The premodern states of Southeast Asia were far from isolated, and played host to a bewildering mix of wandering merchants and adventurers. One of the earliest accounts of a Southeast Asia state was recorded by Chou Ta Kuan, a Chinese visitor to the Khmer Kingdom in the eighth century. There he noted the presence of foreign artisans and merchants. Over a millennium later the foreigners are still there, for the most part happily integrated within their host societies. By far the most visible are the 23 million overseas Chinese. There are also Indians, and large communities of immigrants or historical refugees who have crossed borders and made their homes in one another’s countries. The overseas Chinese stand out because of their high economic profile. In almost every country of the region, their dominance of commerce far out-weighs their numerical strength. How long will they maintain their distinctive ethnic networks, business-practices and cultural traditions? What impact will a dynamic mainland China, with closer commercial and political links to Southeast Asia, have on indigenous attitudes to the overseas Chinese? In some countries there are already concerns that overseas Chinese investment in China could siphon capital and
investment away from Southeast Asia. Although this is probably an exaggerated fear, less considered is the impact on politics and business in Southeast Asia if China were to adopt, for the first time since the Mongol era, a forward policy in the region.

The political landscape of Southeast Asia is changing; the problem is that common assumptions about the nature and direction of this change may not match the eventual reality. Western and even some educated Asian perceptions about the nature of political change rest on a body of economic and political philosophy to which the region’s political elites are proving remarkably resistant. Economies grow at rates three times that of the Western economies without the state fully disengaging itself from the market; politicians respond to people’s needs even though the people are poorly represented; kings play the role of democrats. What does this tell us about the political culture of Southeast Asia? Some of the dinosaurs in Stephen Spielberg’s popular celluloid fantasy ‘Jurassic Park’ adapted to biological conditions when they were genetically recreated in the modern post-Jurassic era —demonstrating the adaptive power of evolution. Are Southeast Asia’s strong governments, considered the political dinosaurs of the New World Order, really on their last legs? Or are they merely in the process of adapting to new conditions?
We do not live by universal ideals alone. We have specific cultures and traditions inherited from the past, some representing the collective wisdom of ages, which need to be revitalised and harnessed in our progress towards the future.

Anwar Ibrahim addressing the Fifth Southeast Asia Forum,

4 October 1993

The years 1853 to 1966 spanned the lives of two of the most influential political figures in modern Southeast Asia. King Chulalongkorn the Great of Thailand was born in 1853. In the course of his long reign from 1868–1910, King Chulalongkorn is credited with transforming Thailand from a ‘traditional Southeast Asian Kingdom into a modern nation state’. Just a year before Chulalongkorn died, a ‘native’ prosecutor from West Sumatra in the employ of the Dutch Indies government fathered a son by one of his wives. His mother named him Sutan Sjahrir. A bright student, Sjahrir was given the best education a ‘native’ could expect to have under Dutch rule in Indonesia. He spent three years in metropolitan Holland and returned to become one of the leading intellectual figures of the Indonesian nationalist struggle. He served his country briefly as prime minister in 1945–6, but died sad and disillusioned while receiving medical treatment in Switzerland in 1966.

Although Chulalongkorn was a king and Sutan Sjahrir only briefly prime minister, both men are credited with contributing to the modernisation of political thinking in their respective countries, and both are often cast as having rejected traditional ways in
favour of ideas from the West. Unfortunately, this rather simplistic view misrepresents their endeavours. For while both men drew on Western thinking to rationalise their programmes for modernisation and change, arguably they remained loyal to their own cultures and traditions. They were, in fact, quintessential Southeast Asian nationalists, blending renewal and tradition in a way that fostered progress, but at the same time preserved tradition. They shared a remarkable talent for synthesis.

Chulalongkorn modernised the bureaucracy and made primary education accessible to ordinary people, setting society on the road to political reform and enlightenment. However, he stopped short of granting full sovereignty to the people and allowing the monarchy’s role to be diluted in any way. He was presented with the idea of a constitutional monarchy, but rejected it. He wrote:

The use of Western ideas as a basis for reform in Siam is mistaken. The prevailing conditions are completely different. It is as if one could take European methods of growing wheat and apply them to rice growing in this country.2

Yet, in his view, there existed ‘no incompatibility between such acquisition of European modern science and the maintenance of our individuality as an independent Asiatic nation’. King Chulalongkorn’s approach to modernisation, considers the modern Thai scholar Thongchai Winichakul, typified the essence of Thai nationalist discourse which ‘presumes that great leaders [in this case monarchs] selectively adopted only good things from the West for the country while preserving the traditional values at their best’.3 Sjahrir is similarly credited with conceiving independent Indonesia as a modern constitutional democracy. But scholars now doubt whether he envisaged totally abandoning the country’s traditional political culture; that in fact he was searching for a middle ground in which Indonesians could be proud of their modernity without losing sight of their past.4

Both men are considered model nationalists. Importantly, though, they were not radicals—even if that is how much of what they said at the time was perceived. In fact, neither man envisaged a complete departure from the past. If they could survey the modern political landscape of Southeast Asia, what would they think? King Chulalongkorn might well be satisfied with the degree of political continuity; to the extent that the principal pillars of
Thai identity—Nation, Religion and King—have been preserved. The political reforms he initiated have enfranchised a broader spectrum of Thais. Yet progress towards popular empowerment has not been made at the expense of strong centralised rule and the institution of the monarchy. Thai society remains for the most part intrinsically hierarchical and status conscious, fostering a state of semi-democracy which preserves the interests of a narrow elite. While most observers felt sure that the events of May 1992 marked the end of the Thai army’s involvement in politics, there is no indication that the traditional tensions between bureaucratic and military factions in government have been fully resolved. Political parties are weak and fractious; politicians are mistrusted by the public and prone to corruption. Perhaps to his relief as a monarch, Chulalongkorn would see few signs that Thailand could do without the mediating role of the King.

Sjahrir died in 1966, just as Indonesia was embarking on a new era of political leadership under a relatively unknown general called Suharto. From his later writings in the early 1960s though, it was plain that Sjahrir was deeply disillusioned with the country’s political course. Despite his socialist sympathies, he saw no future for the communist party. Betraying an old political enmity, he viewed Sukarno as the embodiment of the feudal tradition he so vehemently rejected. It was plain to Sjahrir that the army harboured political pretensions. Yet to him the army seemed like a ‘traveller who has lost his compass’. If he were alive in Indonesia today, the venerable nationalist might be struck the same way. He would detect no appreciable popular support for political ideals or ideology, and note that the middle classes generally supported strong, authoritarian rule. He would be appalled by the survival of a feudal culture of leadership and power and find an army that was still struggling to reconcile its political and security roles. Sjahrir was also an optimist. Close to the end of his life he wrote that he felt the Indonesian people did have a chance of exercising their sovereignty, so long as ‘the government truly behaves like a father of its people’.

Both men would take some comfort from the elements of continuity; the survival of strong leadership acting as a cohesive, bonding agent of state and society—although they would probably recoil from the way it has been abused. They might be pleased to recognise elements of tradition that have survived the upheaval of the colonial era; less happy, though, to see tyranny and injustice
justified in the name of tradition—in reality little different from methods used by the colonial powers. What they might look for, as they did in their own era, was a means to knit the best, most desirable elements of tradition with the most desirable aspects of change. In the best tradition of Southeast Asian nationalism they would seek to blend and synthesise tradition with modernity.

It is ironic indeed that King Chulalongkorn is remembered as a moderniser, yet his image is worshipped by modern Thais to help keep them in touch with their spiritual past (See Chapter 5). For here in Southeast Asia, the tendency to assume uniformity and conformity in global political development runs foul of the apparent tenacity of culture and tradition, particularly in the arena of power and politics. What explains the tenacity of tradition? After all, these states have managed to modernise their economies largely along non-traditional lines. The region’s economic infrastructure is becoming one of the most advanced in the world. Yet these countries harbour political cultures which draw on primordial, pre-modern customs and often reject imported ‘modern’ ideas. Political leaders in Southeast Asia are often heard praising the virtues of modernisation, yet they demand respect for traditional values of authority and leadership. The blending of tradition and modernity can lead to confusion. Perhaps this is because, as we shall see, pioneering nationalists of Southeast Asia adopted superficial forms of Western government to legitimise their states in the eyes of the victorious allies in the post-Pacific War era. In much the same way, finding it hard to dissent from the prevailing world view of political legitimacy, today’s political elites are learning to assume the cloak of liberalism while having no illusions about their distinctiveness. Arguably this is part of a longer tradition in the region of dealing with intrusive change.

One of the most enduring facets of Southeast Asia is the tenacity of tradition. Tradition, not in an archaic or stagnant sense, but more as a dynamic, adaptable component of identity and culture. Scholars have tended to view the role of tradition in a political context as a strawman; something that can be invented, revived and salvaged to serve the ends of power. They see politicians invoking tradition to justify or sanctify power. In his ground-breaking study of nationalism, Benedict Anderson described the ‘imagined communities’ that constituted new states, pointing out that even erstwhile revolutionary regimes, like those in Vietnam and Cambodia, could still wrap themselves in the feudal trappings
of the past; why ‘revolutionary leaderships, consciously or unconsciously, come to play lord of the manor’. Certainly, tradition in the broader Asian context can be moulded and forged into active creeds, and should not be mistaken for quaint near-forgotten custom. Archaic tradition can also be deployed as a barrier to change. As foreign investors flocked to exploit Vietnam’s rapidly liberalising economy, state officials warned that capital and skills were not the only determinants of a successful bid to invest—an understanding of Vietnamese culture and tradition would also be required.

The central, legitimising role of indigenous tradition and culture is perhaps the most important point to grasp about the process of political change in Southeast Asia. It helps us to understand how and perhaps why political evolution has been kind to strong government in the region. Far from failing, the concept and practice of strong, centralised power is adapting and mutating. It may ultimately be doomed (who can predict the course of any of the world’s political systems?), but it has a long way to run. There are no signs in any of the ten Southeast Asian nations that radically different political systems are about to supplant existing ones. Political change is proceeding at a gradual, in places, almost glacial pace. And everywhere the changes seem to protect ruling elites and their interests far more than altering their relations with society.

All the modern political ideologies espoused by contemporary Southeast Asian states draw on tradition but present themselves as modern, forward-thinking creeds. Indonesia’s Pancasila state ideology, Singapore’s ‘Core Principles’, and Malaysia’s Rukun Negara, all espouse Western civil society principles such as freedom, justice and human dignity. They also emphasise the traditional, and for the most part collective, foundations of society: the need for tolerance, a strong sense of community, collective discipline, respect for leadership, and spirituality. This common approach to defining the state in ideological terms underlines the fact that for most countries in Southeast Asia, the challenge presented by Western influence was not how to assimilate, but how to adapt or synthesise the old, the traditional, with the new. For as the Australian academic Clive Kessler aptly puts it: ‘It is in culture that people fashion power as well as acceptance of it.’ Thus, any study of political culture in Asia must
grasp the importance attached to indigenous tradition in the formulation of contemporary political ideas.

This is not an easy argument to sell. Contemporary Southeast Asia is, in economic terms, the fastest growing region in the world. The universalism colouring so much Western social science dictates that it must jettison the baggage of the past in order to catch up with the rest of the modern world. This assumes that modernity, like Pepsi-Cola, comes in a single, universal form—a view that comes naturally to Americans and Europeans, but not to Southeast Asians. They are more eclectic about definitions, tending to shun concrete definitions. Flexibility, more a reluctance to define matters in a strict, definitive sense, acts as a useful means of avoiding conflict. Beliefs are coloured by transience and often determined by circumstance, thus presenting a sterile environment for dialectic and dogma. Take this description of the Javanese epistemology described by a perceptive Japanese observer:

In the Javanese world of ideas, diverse ideologies do not exist as mutually separate entities where interrelationships are those of hostility, compromise, or mechanical eclecticism. They are rather fluid liquids which can easily mix together under certain conditions.10

That is not to rule out the role of ideology altogether. Ideology is an important tool for legitimising authority and maintaining a cohesive society in the region. A key feature of state creeds adopted by Southeast Asian states is their blending of imported and indigenous principles—principles of freedom, justice, and human dignity juxtaposed, often in seemingly contradictory ways, with more collective, cultural and religious definitions of society.

Of course, traditionalism helps preserve and concentrate rather than diffuse power. Traditional forms of democracy in Southeast Asia like the balai (a place where rulers heard audiences) in the Malay tradition, are built into shining examples of how freedom can and should be controlled—or, as Indonesian officials are fond of saying ‘expressed politely’. Ruling elites in the region commonly invoke history and tradition to legitimate the structure of power they preside over. In Singapore this takes the form of Confucianism conveyed as a set of ideal family values all Singaporeans should aspire to. In Indonesia, the traditions of gratitude and respect for those in authority inherent in the Javanese culture of the Solo-
Jogyakarta area are cited as values all Indonesians should cherish—even if these values clash with other, more egalitarian cultures.

Burma’s military rulers have revived traditional forms of corvée labour to press civilians into service to build roads and railways the cash-starved regime can ill-afford to pay wages for. In Thailand, the process of democratisation has greatly liberalised political debate in the media, but strict sanctions remain in force when it comes to discussion of the monarchy. Nightly news broadcasts carry laudatory coverage of the Royal household, and Thai civil servants working up-country still stand to attention when they hear the royal anthem.

These living examples of the strength of traditional power and authority often seem at odds with what is touted as the prevailing global trend. The common assumption is that having been exposed to the West since the colonial period, the subsequent history of these states has been the gradual evolution of Western-style society. Francis Fukuyama hailed this impending outbreak of Western-style liberal democracy as the ‘end of the evolution of human thought’ and hence ‘the end of history’.11 The romantic notion that liberal democracy is the ‘final form of human government’ appears to rule out the possibility that the evolution of thought might be less universal, or that it is influenced by differential economic realities and ethnic, cultural or religious differences; indeed by a very different historical weltanschauung. Not enough thought is given either to the possibility that for Southeast Asians the intrusion of Western (principally European) influence in the colonial era was the end of their history. And, more importantly, that the end of colonial rule allowed the start of a recovery of that history.

Fukuyama considers that in a ‘post-historical’ world ‘the chief axis of interaction between states would be economic, and the old rules of power politics would have decreasing relevance…’.12 But doesn’t this also neatly capture Southeast Asia at the height of colonial power in the late nineteenth century? At that time, colonial trading interests governed interaction between states. Ancient rivalries between states—the old rules from an indigenous perspective—were interrupted by depriving them of sovereignty. Since then, these states have recovered (and in some cases invented) independence, become economically successful and affluent, and are therefore in a position to reassert the ‘old rules’ of power politics for the region. In the process they have rediscovered traditional forms of political expression. Recognising
the enduring role of tradition in modern Asian political culture, Fukuyama has since taken a new tack by suggesting that instead of non-Western traditions conforming with those of the West, there may be ‘fewer points of incompatibility’ between Asian and Western traditions—King Chulalongkorn’s rice and wheat. All the same, he insists that democracy will be the ultimate product of political development.¹³

After the Pacific War it was almost unimaginable that Southeast Asian states could draw on their indigenous cultural roots for the basis of statehood. Somehow the assumption, or perhaps the hope, was that as independent states they would emulate the political systems of the departing colonial powers. The colonial powers liked to think they left a civilising legacy. What they forgot was the strength of the civilisation and cultures they had sat upon for so long. The noted anthropologist Stanley Tambiah considers that one of the most important features of the Theravada Buddhist polities (Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand) is ‘their active consciousness of historical continuity’.¹⁴

Today, there is a common assumption that because Southeast Asian states are engaged in the broader global context and exposed to the communications revolution, they are in the process of subsuming their own traditions and culture in favour of Western fashions, music and television. That may be true of society in the region if culture is considered in an ephemeral sense. Culture is all too often defined by what one wears, or the car one drives. But consider this: Western broadcasting companies involved in the scramble to dominate Asia’s massive satellite market have discovered that even without censorship, unadulterated Western fare does not guarantee an audience. Inevitably, programming has begun to shape itself to local culture and tastes, featuring more Asian faces and Asian music.¹⁵ In 1994 Asians spent almost US$ 2 billion on music recordings. More importantly, the region’s profitable media market is giving birth to indigenous media enterprise with less parochial aspirations. Regional newspapers owned by Southeast Asians and a number of satellite television networks beaming locally-made programmes to the region are already on the starting blocks. In Thailand alone, two daily newspapers, Business Day and Asia Times, are targeting a regional market. Thailand’s Shinawatra Communications and TelecomAsia plan satellite television services for the region with more homegrown programming.
Either through the power of the state, or the power of the market, Southeast Asian societies are finding ways to resist the onslaught of foreign values, and in the process preserve a measure of their tradition and history. This process points to the essence of a common Southeast Asian nationalism: pragmatism and synthesis. You absorb external influences to preserve sovereignty; you take the best elements of those influences and blend them with indigenous values to enhance your identity. The point is that the process of change involves the adaptation and preservation of tradition.

The resistant properties of culture and tradition, whether the product of genuine historical continuity or modern manipulation, constitute an important contextual backdrop to any analysis of political change in the region. It is too easy to assume that economic growth and modernisation that draw on Western models and material culture necessarily guarantee political change along the same lines. Was that the outcome of Latin America’s economic development in the 1930s? This brief survey of Southeast Asia’s political landscape assumes that history (in the broad evolutionary sense which embraces the experience of a people through time) is more resilient than the globalists would have us believe. What’s more it can be recovered and manipulated.

In Southeast Asia, societies and cultures buffeted by intrusive external influences for around a century and a half are in the process of restoring a sense of indigenous identity. With the increasing prosperity of the region people now have the means and collective confidence to do so; and the end result will not be the cloning of Western norms and values but at best an adaptation — or mutation. History is not ending in Southeast Asia but was restarted at the end of the colonial era. (The process actually began with the nationalist movements founded in the twilight of European colonial rule.) Since then, slowly but steadily, ruling elites have recovered and reconstructed traditional models of power and authority. These models may not be wholly swept away by the dynamics of global trade and free market economics commonly believed to be creating a borderless world. Instead, as frameworks of political behaviour, they are learning how to co-habit.

Conceptually, the revival of tradition in this way may be difficult to grasp. From a Western perspective the colonial period of exploitation was succeeded by an era of development which
happily maintained the primacy of European culture beyond the period of European colonial domination. Perhaps because it was economically imperative for former colonial powers to trade with their former colonies, or perhaps out of a sense of guilt, helping to define the shape and course of these countries after independence became an extension of the old colonial *mission civiliatrice*. There was no going back to ‘pre-modern’, ‘old world’ or even ‘primitive’ traditions. In Western eyes these new nations became instead fledgling democracies and newly-developing economies. In the crude economic jargon of the immediate postwar period, developing countries would at some stage achieve ‘take-off and become fully-fledged industrial societies: chips off the old block.

As fledgling industrial societies these ‘new nations’ were expected to develop in a prescribed fashion. Industrial society, Ernest Gellner contends in his 1983 study of nationalism, lives by and relies on ‘sustained and perpetual growth, on an expected and continuous improvement’. Naturally, those Westerners observing the industrialisation process in Southeast Asia measured ‘improvement’ against a Western yardstick. Since modern mankind is irreversibly committed to industrial society, Gellner argues, a high degree of universality has been introduced to societies wherever they are. ‘Modern man is not loyal to a monarch, or a land, or a faith, whatever he may say, but to a culture’, Gellner asserts. The fundamental elements of this universal culture of industrial society are, he suggests, education, science, technology and so on.

No one can dispute the march of progress, or man’s universal attraction to higher planes of knowledge. The problem is that the term ‘universal’ is so often construed as meaning anything ‘Western’; the implication being that non-Western traditions are backward or parochial. Andre Malraux, the idealistic French writer who lived in French Indochina in the 1930s, characterised the arrogance of Western civilisation as ‘Every man dreams of being God.’ Malraux was vexed by the arrogance of French ‘colon’ culture with its claim of cultural superiority. Not much has changed, except perhaps that non-Western cultures are beginning to challenge that primacy. Samuel Huntington’s controversial survey of the post-Cold War world bravely forecasts a new pattern of global conflict. One in which ‘the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilisations’. In the politics of civilisations, he claims, ‘the peoples
and governments of non-Western civilisations no longer remain the objects of history as targets of Western colonialism but join the West as movers and shapers of history’. Huntingdon’s projection of conflict may be contentious, perhaps even well short of reality. But his call for a new definition of what constitutes a civilisation is an important step towards recognising that industrialisation and other aspects of modernity are not necessarily generating uniform societies and political systems. More importantly, he points to the trend among non-Western elites towards ‘indigenisation’:

A de-Westernisation and indigenisation of elites is occurring in many non-Western countries at the same time that Western, usually American, cultures, styles and habits become more popular among the mass of the people.

Huntingdon’s generalisation may sound alarming, but in a more benign sense it captures in essence what is happening in contemporary Southeast Asia. Traditional models of power and authority have been recovered or reinvented to support strong forms of government authority and leadership. Thus the region’s political culture is evolving in a direction which may diverge from trends that are apparent in society.

STAGES OF POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT SINCE 1945

We might consider the political development of modern Southeast Asia as proceeding through three distinct stages. Stage one was initiated by the growth of nationalist movements prior to the Pacific War, and their eventual triumph over colonial rule after the Japanese defeat in 1945. The principal characteristic of stage one was its imitation of Western ideological and institutional political norms. These brave new independent states were conceived by the departing colonial powers as fledgling liberal democracies. Exceptionally, Vietnamese nationalists secured independence for the country north of the seventeenth parallel in 1954, with communist party rule. But it is possible that Ho Chi Minh, who was more of a pragmatist than an ideologue, was forced to rely on Moscow after failing to gain support from Washington. For mainly Western-educated nationalists the democratic system seemed like the best way to legitimise the state in the eyes of the
international community as well as to provide an arena for the mediation of local political demands. Political parties proliferated, and parliaments were elected—or at least the intention to do so was declared in liberal constitutions. Indeed, these states took the first few steps after independence along the path of democracy. They soon strayed off it.

In the course of stage two, which roughly coincides with the mid-1950s, we see democracy on the decline. Implementing liberal democracy proved to be harder than at first envisaged. Local demands proved overwhelming: there were problems of national unity, diverse groups and territories in need of integration. There was a gaping void between the political background and aspirations of the new ruling elite and the capacity of the mass of the population to understand them. Much like colonial reformers who began implementing liberal reforms towards the end of their rule, the indigenous ruling elite talked in terms of an interim stage before a fully fledged democracy could work. The rhetoric spoke of closing the gap between elite and masses through education and economic growth, arguing that as the populace became ready for constructive participation, it would be allowed a greater voice in the running of its affairs.

With real democracy on hold, those who put growth and unity before representation began to dominate the political scene. From the mid-1950s onward, a decade or so after independence in Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, progressive democratic regimes were replaced by uncompromising autocratic ones. As Ruth McVey, a noted scholar of Southeast Asian affairs eloquently wrote:

> the degree but not the direction has varied, from the reduction to marginalities of the permitted area of political discourse through the symbolic concentration of power and popular will in a charismatic leader, to a bare reliance on command from above.\(^\text{19}\)

But more importantly, the kind of political power wielded during this stage represented a recovery of indigenous political tradition. The situation may not have looked quite this way. After all, the autocrats who swept to power wore modern (Western) military uniforms and drove tanks. Attention focused on the new role being played by the military, which was mistakenly considered a modern
institution. The pre-modern and inward-looking perceptions of the officer corps was largely overlooked.

There seems little doubt that Southeast Asian ruling elites were, consciously or otherwise, in a position to select differing models of power in the first decade after independence. Intellectually grounded in a Western political framework by their colonial masters, some of them opted to accept the Western model of constitutional democracy as the only viable way to run a state. These were the ‘lonely, bilingual intelligentsias unattached to sturdy local bourgeoisies’ described by Benedict Anderson.20 In the competition for power which ensued others preferred to fall back on traditional patterns of power and authority, seeking support from the conservative local bourgeoisie. At a time when the bulk of society was not fully exposed to outside influences, the return to a paternalistic tradition of authority may have seemed like the most appropriate route. It was certainly very effective.

Post-colonial society in countries like Indonesia and Burma was ill-equipped to understand the significance of the right of individuals to vote for leaders. Herb Feith points out in his arresting analysis of the decline of democracy in Sukarno’s Indonesia that the choices made by voters in the 1955 elections were ‘meaningful—not as assessments of the performance of particular governments, but as quasi-ideological identifications by villagers’. Successful parties, in his words, were those who ‘succeeded in linking themselves with major social groupings’.21 The Indonesian elections of 1955 are generally considered the fairest the country has ever held; but the result suggested that people were more concerned about religious and ideological affiliation than matters of policy. The elections therefore alerted the establishment to the destabilising religious and ethnic strife which could be provoked by democracy.

Before the colonial intruders either erased or modified indigenous patterns of government, most Southeast Asian societies were accustomed to the imposition of leadership—although whether leaders were accepted or obeyed often depended on a public consensus of their performance. After independence the urge to modernise political institutions ran up against the inability of most segments of the population to comprehend modern principles of government. Ignorance encouraged abuse of the modern systems introduced. For example, rural voters in Thailand’s north-eastern region in the 1980s were enticed to vote
for candidates by the manipulation of auspicious numbers and lucky colours on posters and ballot sheets. Rampant vote buying for sums as little as US$ 2 per vote continues to plague elections in rural areas, and in a survey of rural and urban voters up and down the country in 1995, a Thai sociologist found that 17 per cent openly admitted that they sold their vote. In Malaysia, the government party warns rural voters that support for the opposition could deny them development; the opposition Islamic Party of Malaysia warns villagers that voting for the government could deny them a place in the afterworld. In June 1992 a farmer in Central Java, when pressed to consider his political rights ahead of a general election, responded by saying things were better because he now owned three shirts instead of one.

Ironically, development—the very instrument of Western-inspired social and economic change—became a powerful political placebo in post-colonial Southeast Asia. Industrialisation, self-sufficiency in food production and a supporting cast of prestige projects persuaded people that they were better off without having to demand the right to choose their governments. Indonesians have been showered with economic development and told that political development will follow. In Malaysia, the government attacks its critics for hindering development. The thinking is that if a government delivers development why criticise it. Besides, the collective discipline, social harmony and political acquiescence which supported strong government also helped foster growth and productivity in the early stages of Southeast Asia’s economic development. Who could argue with that?

In more recent times, the balance has swung the other way. Stage three of the region’s political development has seen more affluent educated sections of societies exposed to the outside world who are in a better position to judge for themselves how they want to be ruled. The materialistic values revered in Western societies have proven attractive to some. Traditional Asian collective values are criticised in liberal intellectual quarters for stifling freedom and hindering creativity. Liberal intellectuals argue that respect for the individual and the celebration of personal achievement may be essential if the region wants to maintain its economic edge—an argument considered more fully later on. But the spread of Western values in Asian societies has also reinforced the belief among ruling elites in their own traditional models of power. They fear what a more Westernised future holds for their societies; drug
addiction, soaring crime rates, and the breakdown of the nuclear family. They see extreme tendencies in Western society which they don’t want emulated in their own countries. As Singapore’s Minister of Information and the Arts recently put it:

In the spectrum between extreme communitarianism at one end and extreme individualism at the other, Eastern societies have moved towards the centre while many Western societies are veering off to the other extreme.\textsuperscript{24}

Individuals and their capacity to influence society with ideas: the very thought that an individual could think differently from the rest of the community and then affect that community’s thinking frightens those who conceive the societies they govern as fragile and constantly in need of guidance from above. A Singaporean minister has compared ideas with the motor car: ‘Just as cars can knock down people, ideas can also be dangerous... Ideas can kill.’\textsuperscript{25} The ‘cult’ of the individual, small group advocacy and the breakdown of family values all seem to threaten the harmony of society. Of course, they also imply a greater sharing of power and a threat to the political status quo.

The tension between harmony conscious political elites and the changing societies they govern is central to the contemporary political analysis of modern Southeast Asia, and is the hallmark of the third and latest stage of political development there. Basically, the state in Southeast Asia is entering a period of relative strength. It has survived the ideological conflict of the Cold War, and achieved legitimacy by endowing society with a substantial but differential measure of prosperity. Stable and conservative, the modern state in Southeast Asia is slow to change its fundamental character, but quick to adopt the superficial characteristics of progressive modernity as defined in Western terms. Many observers have termed this the era of ‘semi-democracies’.\textsuperscript{26}

These hybridised systems are prone to tension. As long as there are elements in society challenging the authority of the state, the state feels it must preserve the boundaries of its power. The challenge for the observer is to steer the analysis clear of subjective value judgements about how this tension is going to be resolved. No one is predicting social revolution any time soon in a region where the tinder for social discontent is dampened by opportunities for wealth creation, social mobility and the fulfilment of basic needs.
Governments which maintain harsh laws restricting the freedom of expression of their subjects also make sure that enough of these same subjects can buy shares in lucrative privatisation schemes or invest money overseas.

For a more plausible assessment of the region’s future political development, the trend must be projected along a more conservative path—one that recognises the role of traditional political culture as much as modern external influences. But that is not to say that Southeast Asian societies must be cast in the ‘orientalist’s’ conceptual strait jacket. We should not consider that the way Southeast Asian polities develop will be any less dynamic, or conceptually less advanced than those of modern Europe. The political systems they fashion might even one day be considered more advanced and less intrinsically unstable than models hallowed in the West. As Henry Luce, the Chinese-born American publisher predicted over half a century ago:

The future of Mankind depends on Asia’s response to the West. And that depends on whether the West knows what it has to say. We’ll end up learning from Asia, learning how our assumptions need to be corrected in order that we may more surely make our way toward the goals of universal truth and concord.

Yet for now, Southeast Asia is still considered by many in the West to be politically underdeveloped. Prevailing paternalistic models of power and authority have allowed economic and material development to proceed at an astonishing pace. But the authoritarian nature of these models has not impressed advocates of Western-style democracy. Before assessing whether or not these advocates have a case for global political uniformity, it is important to understand the expression of Southeast Asian political culture in the contemporary context, how it has evolved, and where it is heading.

**ASSERTING AUTHORITY IN THE POST-COLONIAL ERA: THE DECLINE OF**
CONSTITUTIONAL DEMOCRACY IN INDONESIA

For most of the colonised countries of Southeast Asia, the most pervasive contact with the West occurred in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first four decades of the twentieth century. It was only by then, after 300 hundred years or more of contact with Europeans, that all resistance to colonial rule was overcome, administrative systems installed, and communications beyond the colonial chief cities effectively established. Besides, concern about forms of government and the administration of justice were low on the list of priorities for the early merchant-colonisers. It was only by the nineteenth century that liberal and humanitarian concerns—newly established in Europe—began to have any impact on colonial administration. The physical impact of the European presence is easy to exaggerate in the early colonial period. In the late-seventeenth century the number of Europeans living on Java probably numbered no more than 2,500, most of them huddled behind the walls of Batavia, the head-quarters of the Dutch East India Company. By the first decade of the twentieth century, a provincial city like Bandung boasted over 15,000 Europeans, while Batavia was described as a ‘suburb of the Hague’, ‘too much influenced by the manners and opinions of the mother country to be accounted a colonial town’.27

During this relatively brief period, urban centres in Southeast Asia were exposed to the full weight of European metropolitan culture. Not everyone was affected, however. The cultural impact of Western colonialism never penetrated large areas of rural Southeast Asia, especially at the village level. The most pervasive impact was on those the colonial rulers groomed as servants of the colonial state. Liberal education was offered to the privileged few. The rest of the population was intermittently exposed to ‘liberal’ notions of administration and justice. In the process, the last vestiges of precolonial power and authority were reduced to purely symbolic forms. While this development is usually considered a liberating experience, one which prepared elites to govern their newly-independent countries in an enlightened way, the more recent political history of the region has demonstrated that these precolonial traditions were not altogether lost.

Wherever one looks in modern Southeast Asia, the process of recovering tradition can be observed. The newly-formed Republic
of Indonesia initially adopted a liberal constitutional model of democracy after independence in 1949. As Herb Feith points out, the fact that a Western model of constitutional democracy was adopted at the outset could be explained in part by the lack of practical alternatives, and partly to seek approval from the Western powers. Only a few individual leaders like Mohammad Hatta and Mohamad Natsir were attached to the values of constitutional democracy. This was not necessarily a democracy recognisable in a Western context:

it was not seen as having representative functions, nor as necessarily linked with majority rule or with institutionalized opposition. There was in fact, little support in the prevailing body of political ideas for the characteristic principles and mechanisms of constitutional democracy.\(^{28}\)

As approval from the West became less important, and the factionalism bred of a multiparty system made actual government of the country difficult, so the appeal of radical nationalist ideas favoured by president Sukarno weakened Hatta and his band of Western-educated liberals (including Sjahrir). Political parties struggled to balance the demands of their constituencies to provide money and jobs against the technical and economic realities of participating in government. Their ideological differences sharpened primordial communal tensions in Indonesian society. Muslims demanded a greater say in running the state. The numerous coalition governments of this 1949–56 period were considered democratic, but they did little to implement urgently-needed economic and social policies.

Sukarno’s solution to the weakness of constitutional democracy was to fall back on tradition. Instead of finding new ways to order democratic life, he imposed top-down control. In what was to become a common excuse for resorting to traditional patterns of authority in the region, Sukarno sought to forge a consensus (citing the traditional practice of *gotong royong*, or ‘mutual cooperation’) among key elements in society. That this consensus drew all the contending factions and parties into the government did not necessarily contravene the ethics of democracy. However, Sukarno’s insistence on the need for ‘guidance’ from above effectively meant the abandonment of Constitutional Democracy. Guidance was provided by a ‘National Council’, a body composed
of various functional groups in society appointed by the President which shunned voting and made decisions by reaching a consensus. The Constituent Assembly was dissolved and government was conducted in the National Council in tandem with the military, which by this time had emerged as an important focus of political power. ‘Guided Democracy’ was born in collusion with the army in July 1959 and Sukarno announced that ‘free-fight liberalism’ and ‘Western-style democracy’ had failed.

In its place, a traditional model of authority based on manipulating patron-client relations was substituted. Sukarno projected himself as the bapak or ‘father’ who knew best how to run the country. The late Indonesian philosopher S.Takdir Alisjahbana noted that ‘a salient point in the structure of Sukarno’s Guided Democracy is the pre-condition that he is the only and absolute leader, not to be disturbed by councils, parties, nor by other personalities’. In subsequent speeches Sukarno maintained this stress on leadership. ‘The time has now arrived to declare clearly and unequivocally the Leadership of the Revolution’, he thundered on 17 August 1961. Sukarno enshrined the position of leadership in a new political trinity, the so-called ‘Re-So-Pim’ which stood for Revolution, Socialism and Leadership, as an inseparable trinity. By becoming the Great Leader of the Revolution, Sukarno also insinuated his leadership of the querulous military. In the wake of Guided Democracy, Sukarno acquired other grand titles like ‘Great Leader of the Workers’, ‘Father of the Proletariat’, and so on.

In the process, the concept of leadership as absolute and unquestioned was reinjected into the Indonesian political context, from which it has yet to be removed. ‘We have been independent for 50 years’, remarked Islamic intellectual Nurcholis Madjid, ‘but so far we have only experienced leadership under fathers of the nation’. Sukarno was the father of independence. Suharto since the early 1980s has been dubbed the father of development.

Under Sukarno’s paternal brand of leadership disagreement or opposition was frowned upon as not in keeping with the spirit of the ‘family principle’ of statehood. The system bore no relation to the Western-style constitutional democracy of the 1950s. Only the physical institutions of democracy were retained as empty symbols of representative government. In the end the system failed him, not so much because he could not wield power effectively, but because the direction in which he channelled this power —tilting at the
major powers, inviting outside interference, attacking neighbouring countries, and running down the economy—eventually stirred the army to move against him. Yet because by this stage Sukarno had become president for life, the military’s only recourse was to the traditional palace coup.

Sukarno’s successor was Major General Suharto, a staff officer who had been a soldier since the 1940s and fought in the revolution against the Dutch. He rose to the presidency in the wake of a still not completely explained coup attempt launched on 30 September 1965 when elements of Sukarno’s palace guard, among others, kidnapped and murdered six army generals in central Jakarta. The military stepped in to restore order, blaming the Indonesian Communist Party with its links to Sukarno. Sukarno was eased out of power, and the army replaced the civilian government, with Suharto at the helm.

Suharto further refined traditional elements of power and authority after becoming president in 1968. There was no return to Constitutional Democracy under President Suharto’s New Order. Instead, the original 1945 Constitution was used. With 37 articles, the charter has been described as ‘one of the shortest written constitutions in the world’. Drawn up under the supervision of Dr Supomo, a traditionally-minded Javanese lawyer, the charter contains short clauses prescribing religious freedom and equality before the law. But unlike the longer, more detailed, ‘Provisional’ constitution that replaced it in 1950, the legal underpinning of these rights was not clearly spelled out. Sukarno had reintroduced the 1945 constitution along with Guided Democracy in 1959. Suharto saw no reason to go back to the more democratic 1950 document, and the 1945 Constitution has remained in force ever since.

The uncertain and chaotic state of Indonesia in 1966 generated tremendous anxiety among minority groups. Indonesian Chinese and Christians (the two groups overlapped considerably) feared a Muslim backlash against them. The 30 September coup attempt appeared to unlock centrifugal forces inherent in Indonesia’s ethnic and religious diversity, which could explain why Suharto was virtually given a mandate by the middle classes and the business community to trim political freedoms and focus on restoring economic and social stability. Riding a wave of elite support for making economic growth a priority over political development, political parties were further emasculated and eventually
consolidated into three ‘functional groups’ which were not permitted to differ from the government over matters of policy and state ideology. Decree Number 6, 1968, vested the President with extraordinary powers to use whatever means necessary to secure the stability of the state—effectively empowering him to go beyond the limits of constitutional rule. This decree was only revoked in 1992.

Why has Suharto been able to legally hold unlimited power for so long? Unlike Sukarno, Suharto managed to inoculate society against destabilising political mobilisation and concentrate on constructive economic growth. Suharto’s brand of leadership was fuelled by development and stability, rather than confrontation and revolution. Ultimately, this meant he could serve the ends of modernisation and progress yet at the same time wield power with impunity.

The cultural roots of how Suharto conceived the relationship between ruler and the ruled are not hard to trace. Suharto grew up in the shadow of the old Javanese kingdom of Martaram, steeped in the medieval palace culture of Jogyakarta. He spoke the Javanese language which still today is characterised by complex levels of speech determined by the status of who is being addressed. The Javanese language has no word which allows someone of high status to address someone of lower status. The word for ‘thank you’ can only be used when addressing someone of higher status. Thus gratitude flows from the lower levels of society upward—never down. Little wonder, perhaps, that early Indonesian nationalism, as reflected in the writing of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, was as preoccupied with how to dilute the stubborn aloofness of the traditional Javanese aristocracy, as it was with shaking off Dutch rule.33

Suharto has nurtured a political culture that represents the distillation of indigenous Javanese political instincts, or as some would have it ‘neo-Javanism’, where the emphasis is on the strict observance of hierarchy reinforced by patronage to maintain the harmony of society.34 It is important to stress, however, that this aspect of the Javanese culture is specific to the court cities of Jogyakarta and Solo, nor does it bear much similarity to other, more egalitarian cultures in Indonesia, like that of the Bataks of North Sumatra, or the Minangkabau of West Sumatra. Indonesia’s immediate post-colonial elite, men like Hatta and Shajrir, tried but failed to match the liberal ideas they learned from Europe to the
broader reality of Indonesian society. In the ensuing chaos of Sukarno’s fall, establishing order became a priority. To do so, Suharto and his military partners fell back on their instincts and their rather parochial origins. Not coming from the Western-educated aristocratic elite groomed by the Dutch, these instincts were rooted more in traditional Javanese society, or at least how they perceived that society to be.

**FINESSING FEUDALISM: THE CONTEST FOR ABSOLUTE POWER IN MALAYSIA**

In the neighbouring Malay peninsular, traditional forms of power and authority were preserved but modified by the colonial regime. The British in Malaya reduced the nine traditional Malay rulers of the peninsular states to pale eccentric shadows of their former feudal stature. British officials fully exploited the influence of the rulers over Malay society by preserving the institution of the Malay monarchy, embellishing it with the trappings of symbolic sovereignty, but actually reducing its political power. The new administrators made sure that the ruler was progressively isolated from his people. Ancient forms of popular access to the ruler through the chiefs and the *balai*, or public audience hall were restricted or done away with altogether:

> There might occasionally be a gathering in the *balai* to confer a title on the successor to a chieftanship or court office but the interplay, formal as it may have been, between ruler and royal court had lost its significance. Even the most impotent of rulers had been the apex, the ‘organising principle’, of Malay aristocratic life and also the symbol of the state to the general body of his subjects.35

Replacing the *balai* with garden parties in London helped erode traditional forms of representation and government built into the Malay monarchy. The monarchy was effectively fossilised which enhanced its feudal trappings, but at the same time allowed the more pluralistic social and political functions governing the relationship between ruler and subject to decay. Modified in this way the traditional Malay monarchy was left to be revived once the colonial intruders departed.
In 1946, the founders of Malaysia’s United Malays National Organisation (UMNO—still the dominant political party) enlisted the monarchy as a symbol to promote Malay nationalism. This helped the Malays to recover their rulers with independence. But the traditional role the rulers played as the organising principle of Malay aristocratic life was lost. The British encouraged the sultans to acquire a taste for Earl Grey tea and tennis, which at once made them identify with the cultural trappings of British aristocracy remote from ordinary Malays. Moreover, the new organising principle for Malaysian society was a form of administration and justice left behind by the departing British which, following the British constitutional model, eschewed royal involvement in politics. Constitutionally detached from the political process, the Malay monarchy initially served as a useful symbol of Malay nationalism, tying Malay identity firmly to Islam and Malay culture as enshrined by the sultans. Ironically, the identification of Malays with their sultans to achieve modern nationalistic ends, allowed aspects of the sultan’s feudal tradition to seep down into the Malay political arena. Decorations or pingkat awarded by royalty have become important symbols of status for the Malay political elite. Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad is one of the most decorated of them all. And even though he sometimes publicly eschews being referred to by his honorific title Datuk Seri, few ordinary Malaysians have the temerity to refer to him by the more familiar ‘Doc’.

For all his royal decorations, Mahathir himself increasingly felt bridled by the residual power and status of the sultans. Royal protocol always seats him, the ambitious leader of one of the region’s successful nations, behind the sultans at public functions; the federal system left the rulers with annoying residual powers that included land, religion and matters of customary law, as well as complete legal immunity. The more confident the Malay political establishment was of its powers of patronage, the more uncomfortable it seemed to become with the social and economic status of the country’s nine reigning sultans. The government’s push for Malays to modernise their outlook on life—to become more technologically and economically oriented—sat awkwardly with the blind respect traditional Malay culture accorded the sultans. So did UMNO’s quest for legitimacy as the pre-eminent guardian of Malay culture and interests. An initial attempt to cut the sultans down to size by amending the constitution in the early
1980s, failed because public sentiment was against Mahathir. But when Sultan Mahmood Iskandar ibni al-Marhum Sultan Ismail of Johor, a former King of Malaysia, allegedly flayed a school hockey coach in late 1992 the stage was set for a new round of confrontation between politicians and rulers.

Even a decade later, moving to curtail the power of the sultans was considered risky. But as it turned out, stripping the sultans of their legal immunity by an act of parliament in 1993 had a cathartic effect on the Malay political elite. Their confidence stemmed from the fact that the general public, though not totally in accord with the move, were growing uncomfortable with the extent of privilege enjoyed by the rulers. The public therefore stood by while the last vestige of the sultans’ power was removed. What many feared, though, was that instead of erasing feudalism for good, the changes merely transferred supreme power to Malay politicians.

Mahathir and his brash young political deputies resented the divided loyalty between state and the centre implied by the sultans’ titular role in the federal system. Sultan Mahmood of Johor, for example, presided over a notionally independent constitution and a small private army. Now that the rulers had lost their legal immunity, the fear was that the ground was prepared for the greater concentration of power in the hands of Mahathir’s United Malays National Organisation. And in the Malay political culture, where effective power must be absolute, the emasculation of the rulers also cleared the way for commoners to take their place as distributors of patronage. In the old days, one former UMNO stalwart mused, there was accountability, a degree of modesty among politicians, as well as concern about corruption. ‘Look at them now’, he said. ‘They no longer worry about the size of their houses, or number of their cars. Their attitude is so what? who cares?’ Mirroring the days when the sultans used to shop at Harrods and buy their baubles at the crown jewellers, a local fashion designer in Kuala Lumpur told of how he was welcomed at fashionable boutiques in Paris and Rome with champagne and limousine rides once he introduced himself as a Malaysian. When he was invited to sign their guest books, they read like a roll call of the Malaysian political and business elite.

To outsiders Malaysia’s political system looks more pluralistic and democratic; look closely and a carefully constructed system of social and political control becomes evident. The Australian
academic Harold Crouch argues that the country’s ‘essentially democratic political system’ has been modified by an ‘entrenched elite that took whatever steps were considered necessary to ensure its continued control of the government’. In addition to the maintenance of a stringent internal security act allowing detention without trial for a period of up to two years, there is a constitutional provision enabling the government to declare a state of emergency ‘if the security or economic life of the Federation or any part thereof is threatened’.

While few Malaysians would argue with the need for safeguards against incitement of racial hatred in Malaysia’s plural society, the government has used these measures to deal with political opposition. In 1977, a Proclamation of Emergency was used to overthrow an opposition state government in the north-eastern state of Kelantan. In 1992, Jeffery Kittingan, the younger brother of Sabah’s then chief minister, was detained without trial for two years on suspicion that he was plotting to take Sabah out of the Federation. Jeffery’s brother, Pairin, led the United Sabah Party, which left the ruling coalition on the eve of the 1990 elections, and almost precipitated a defeat for Mahathir. The government takes care to invoke democracy and the rule of law whenever it deploys these legal mechanisms of state control. ‘They confuse rule of law with rule by law’, is how a Malaysian lawyer puts it. A prominent Malaysian human rights lawyer argues that periodic amendments to the constitution and existing statutes ‘have gradually curtailed the freedom of speech and information’.

**INVENTING THE STRONG STATE: THE CASE OF SINGAPORE**

Singapore had to invent a political culture. Ejected from the Malaysian Federation in 1965, this prosperous entrepôt mainly populated by overseas Chinese merchants found itself washed up in a sea of Malay and Muslim nationalism. The sources of Singapore’s invention were colourfully eclectic. It all began with a group of British-educated, mostly Chinese, professionals who were caught up by the tide of nationalism sweeping Asia after the Pacific War. Led by a charismatic and intensely bright British-educated barrister by the name of Lee Kuan Yew, they helped win self-government for the island after 123 years of British colonial rule in 1959. Afterwards, there was an immediate demand for popular
support, which this group did not have. Initially Lee and his People’s Action Party turned to the communists with their mass appeal. The communists helped the PAP win power in the island’s first elections, after which Lee realised that Marxism was not going to feed mouths and set up businesses. So he turned to neighbouring Malaya for inclusion in the planned multiracial Federation of Malaysia to ensure that Singapore could have access to a hinterland market. When the merger failed in 1965, Lee turned his back on democratic socialism. He opted instead for a strict and uncompromising style of government that prompted a US official in the 1970s to describe Singapore as ‘the best run country in the world’.

Lee Kuan Yew is undoubtedly one of Southeast Asia’s most successful leaders. A character of some complexity, he defies accurate interpretation. To most observers his pragmatic, flexible shepherding of Singapore through one economic phase to the next —always willing to adapt and change according to prevailing circumstances—presents a record rivalled by few other regional leaders. More recently Lee has apparently developed the firm conviction that Confucian Chinese values and a close but balanced relationship with modern China are crucial to Singapore’s survival. The balance is provided by Singapore’s close economic and security ties with the United States.

While it is easy to define Singapore’s strategic position, it is less easy to find a genus for its politics. In the course of leading Singapore first to independence and then on to a meteoric economic ascent, Lee seemed to select social and political models as casually as a browser in a Sunday market. At each stage Lee defended the principles of the hour with a passion few could match. In the 1950s democratic socialism was needed to garner popular support. When the authorities were locking up anti-colonial strikers, Lee defended democratic society as one ‘which allows the free play of ideas, which avoids revolution by violence because revolution by peaceful methods is allowed’. Later he condemned liberal politics as an unworkable formula for newly-developing Asian countries.43

What has ultimately emerged is a curious cross between the Leninist secret cell system and the Confucian Chinese Mandarinate. Opposition is muted, if not altogether muffled. Much like the Communist Parties of China and Vietnam, the PAP is led by a central executive committee elected by a few hundred
selected party cadres. These few hundred cadres are recruited from the party’s regular membership which is not widely known as the membership rolls are kept secret. Party proceedings are shrouded in secrecy. It was hard for Lee, as party secretary general, to be unseated. There are no open elections for the post and he alone selected the cadres and the central executive committee—who in turn elect the secretary general. The pope chooses the cardinals, and the cardinals elect the next pope.

Having said that, Singapore also does a very good impression of a modern civic society. It is almost a cliché to say that modern Singapore is run efficiently. Its educational and health standards are among the highest in the region, and perhaps exceed those in the United States. The republic’s legal system is based on a British model—although political dissidents, like former Solicitor General Francis Seow would argue that it is administered less fairly. Singapore boasts well-run public services, and an orderly urban administration. These are features which have attracted foreign multinationals to go beyond manufacturing and locate their regional corporate headquarters in the city state. In this respect Singapore has transformed a poor and unruly immigrant Chinese population into one that respects authority or pays for transgression through seemingly minor yet culturally humiliating acts of penance. Hence convicted felons find their crimes published in the daily newspapers to shame them. Litterbugs are tasked to clear up public places wearing yellow suits so they can be clearly identified. Video-cameras installed in lifts detect spitters and urinators, and errant motorists are identified using hidden cameras. Edicts in the shape of by-laws or ordinances and humiliating punishment in the guise of community service; these faintly amusing Singaporean phenomena nevertheless betray the establishment’s abiding faith in methods for imposing collective order and discipline by exploiting the cultural importance of face.

DEMOCRACY THAI-STYLE

Thailand was never subject to colonial rule, but was constantly threatened by external powers. Thailand has therefore been forced to adapt its political culture to changing regional and international circumstances. The Thais of course have been shaping their culture in response to external influence ever since Chinese attempts to subjugate them in their ancestral hearth of Yunnan forced them to
migrate southward into mainland Southeast Asia. The historian D.G.E Hall described the Thais ‘as remarkable as assimilators as the Normans in Europe’. They took elements of Chinese civilisation with which they were familiar, came into contact with Hinduism through the Khmers, and probably adopted Buddhism through trade. Despite its eclectic beginnings, Thai civilisation has proved to be enduring. A key factor was the assiduous cultivation of good ties with China. Foreshadowing Thailand’s later diplomatic prowess, early Thai kings rarely neglected sending tribute to the Chinese emperor, and therefore fended off the traumatic invasion neighbouring Burma suffered. Recurring conflict with the neighbouring Burmese kingdom saw cities rise and fall, populations come and go. But the early system of administration established in the mid-fifteenth century survived more or less intact until the mid-nineteenth century.

Thailand’s response to the arrival of the European was to play one ambitious trading power off against another. The strategy cleaved neatly with the intense commercial competition between English, Dutch and French trading interests in the seventeenth century and probably saved the country from colonial subjugation. But it also meant that along the way Thailand was forced to accept dealing with foreigners and their ways. At one stage in the reign of King Narai (1657–88), this meant coming close to accepting Christianity from the French. The lessons learnt proved useful when, in the modern period, Thailand fended off the full weight of Japanese imperial rule by capitulating. Postwar reprisals from the victorious allies were forestalled, though, by never having presented a formal declaration of war to the United States.

Throughout its history Thailand has preserved the monarchy which for over 700 years has been the apex of power and authority. The absolute monarchy was abolished in 1932, when reforming bureaucrats and soldiers forced a weak King to retreat behind a constitutional screen. But if the monarchy initially withdrew from the political arena, political circumstances in the late 1950s allowed a comeback when Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, one of Thailand’s more colourful military dictators, harnessed the royal family to support his regime. Sarit well knew that despite the events of 1932, ordinary Thai people never really stopped revering their King as a near deity. In the spiritual sense, the King continued to be the real source of legitimate power.
The painful separation of church and state experienced in Europe, makes it hard for Western observers to comprehend the unquestioned legitimacy of Asian royalty—which placed divine and worthy kings and their more secular constitutional successors above the political fray and therefore in the best position to determine the outcome of political conflict. The 1932 coup notionally deprived the monarchy of its absolute powers, but once political power was conferred on the bureaucracy it was not long before the formal compartments into which traditional Thai administration had been divided since the fifteenth century began competing for pre-eminence. In the ensuing struggle between the civil and military arms of government, the king emerged as the power-broker—a role so astutely played by the current monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadej (who ascended the throne in 1946), that many contemporary observers fail to notice the direct parallel with the Thai monarchy’s traditional role as the sole source of legitimate power.

The King’s influence was first effectively brought to bear when students in Bangkok mounted mass demonstrations against military rule, demanding more democracy in October 1973. In a move foreshadowing his intervention almost two decades later, the King sided with the people, forcing the termination of the Thanom/Phrapas regime and ushering in a civilian prime minister, Sanya Dharmasakti. The power-broking role played by the King has not always promoted democracy. In 1976, the King sided with the military when democracy tested the cohesion of the state. Addressing his people at the time, King Bhumibol rationalised his stand by asserting that the threat of communist insurgency called for support from the military: ‘The Thai military has the most important role in the defence of our country at all time, ready always to carry out its duty to protect our country.’

Over the last 25 years of coup and counter coup, the King became astute at playing one military faction off against another. Take the abortive coup of April 1981. The coup was instigated by a group of some fifty young officers who resented the power politics of their elders—which fostered favouritism and therefore hindered promotion. Typical of a ‘young turk’ military faction, they projected their frustration in idealised terms of a return to professional military principles to recover the army’s esprit de corps. But when they launched a coup on 1 April, the King and Queen were able to evacuate the capital to the north-eastern
provincial capital of Korat (also known as Nakhorn Ratchasima). From there, the incumbent Prime Minister, and former assistant army commander, General Prem Tinsulanond was able to supervise the military operation against the coup-makers. At the time, many Thais saw Prem’s close palace connections and the King’s move up to Korat—a traditional royal manoeuvre to combat insurrection—as the decisive factor crushing the coup. Professor Likhit Dhiravegin observed that these coup attempts failed, not only because of the lack of unity within the armed forces, but:

also because of the fact that the most important power centre [meaning the throne] did not want to see the country torn apart by a violent power struggle…and wanted instead to see a healthy development of the democratic process.47

Thailand’s ‘most important power centre’ demonstrated this resolve once again in May 1992, when the world’s attention was focused on the show of ‘people’s power’ on the streets of Bangkok. It was the King’s public castigation of army leaders in a televised audience on 20–1 May, which actually brought the army to a grinding halt and sent the soldiers back to their barracks. More recently, the King has deployed his knowledge and experience of political affairs to castigate politicians and criticise society for selfish material desires. King Bhumibol’s astute but discrete political role in the latter part of his 50 year reign is perhaps best seen as a constant effort to balance the forces within the Thai political elite.

The role of the monarchy in the past three decades demonstrates how much of its former power has been recovered since 1932. With the demise of the absolute monarchy in 1932 this has effectively involved playing civilian bureaucrats off against military cliques. The precise ordering and composition of that elite may be what is changing rather than the political culture per se. Military influence in the political arena has waned since the Army’s February 1991 intervention and its bloody aftermath. Younger officers leave the service early because of the perceived lack of opportunities for social and financial advancement, or they stay on for professional reasons only. Regional political and business interests find themselves in the ascendant and are trying to fashion a constitution which suits their specific interests—and more
importantly wards off future military intervention. Now, they are running up against a Bangkok-centred business elite that boasts a less parochial brand of leadership.

Yet however more democratic Thailand becomes, it seems unlikely that the monarchy will not be called upon again to legitimise political coalitions and sanctify the government of the day. Indeed, the monarchy’s sway cuts both ways, as the newly installed government of Prime Minister Banharn Silpa-aracha found during its first month in office in mid-1995. In what Thai observers regarded as unprecedented comments from the throne on a sitting elected government, the King spoke his mind to remind the government of its frail legitimacy. ‘The country’s image is not particularly good’, said the King, adding that instead of tackling the critical problem of Bangkok’s traffic, ‘They [the government] only talk, talk, and argue argue, argue.’

These are occasions when the King appears to be speaking his mind. In August, when he criticised the Banharn government’s handling of the traffic problem, he invoked his constitutional rights as a citizen; but few Thais take his words as anything less than a command—‘a heavenly blessing’ as one of the chastised ministers put it. Outsiders may consider it inappropriate for a constitutional monarch to assert his influence over the political process. But for most Thais, the King’s actions are far from anachronistic. In a society where the gulf between elite interests at the centre and the mass of rural people remains wide, it is seen as the moral duty of a good monarch to ensure good governance.

From the examples given above we can see that the political development of modern states in Southeast Asia has drawn, in an active sense, as much on pre-colonial tradition as it has on imported Western models. Ironically, the tendency of some colonial regimes to preserve those elements of indigenous political culture which enhanced control over their subjects, left intact the more rigid, authoritarian aspects of that culture for independent indigenous elites to recover. Why is this point so important to grasp? First because it helps us to understand the region in an indigenous context. But more importantly, perhaps, because this context offers a better guide to the future shape of these states.

Modernisation is a two-way street. While it is safe to say that the region’s astonishing economic growth has followed many of the precepts of Western industrial development—and benefited from a considerable amount of Western capital and expertise—the
full spectrum of social and political change is far too complex to ascribe solely to imported norms and values. One of the major factors overlooked in the analysis of how Southeast Asia has coped with the structural changes accompanying this growth, is the remarkable degree of cultural continuity. One aspect of this continuity most overlooked is the relationship between political leaders and society in Southeast Asia.
The emperor’s speeches were remarkably kind, gentle, and comforting to the people, who had never heard his mouth form a harsh or angry word. And yet you cannot rule an empire with kindness.

Ryszard Kapuscinski, The Emperor

Rarely has any journalist got close enough to Indonesia’s President Suharto to question him. However, one intrepid foreign reporter managed to throw a question about Indonesia’s democracy to the septuagenarian president as he was casting his vote in the June 1992 parliamentary elections. The fearless questioner asked whether the country’s two opposition parties would be given a role in government if they won sufficient proportions of the popular vote. ‘No sir’, the president firmly replied, ‘We have a different system here.’

In neighbouring Malaysia, the bicameral parliament is modelled closely on the British parliament at Westminster, right down to the silver mace that nestles in front of the be-gowned speaker. The country holds elections without fail every four or five years that are, by regional standards, considered free and fair. Given these similarities with the British system, this author asked the speaker of the Malaysian parliament, Tan Sri Zahir Ismail, why the Prime Minister only rarely attended parliamentary question time. One conspicuous difference between the House of Commons at Westminster and Malaysia’s 192 seat Dewan Rakyat is the infrequent appearance of the majority leader. Government ministers generally leave their parliamentary replies to parliamentary secretaries and there are times that the government benches are almost deserted. Sometimes there is barely a quorum
in the chamber because politicians find it more congenial to discuss politics in the member’s tea room. The speaker’s rationale for this casual approach to parliamentary democracy was that government leaders are far too busy running the country to attend parliament. And besides, he said, why should the Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, answer questions from the opposition since the two-thirds majority he commands is proof enough of the confidence he enjoys among the people.

One of the striking features about the politics of modern Southeast Asia is how openly political leaders flaunt its democratic shortcomings. Their self-assurance, and the longevity of their regimes fly in the face of those who argue that economic success begets political change. These strong leaders may once have relied upon constitutional support for legitimacy. But now, basking in the reflection of their achievements, they merely observe the protocols and go through the motions of democracy. They no longer act as if the paraphernalia of democratic government are really needed. They preside over systems which, in the words of a retired Indonesian general ‘look like democracies on the outside, but function differently within’.¹

Yet, the longer men like Suharto and Mahathir stay in power, the more secure their position seems. Local popular perceptions measure their success in terms of stability and material progress which cloud memories of how they may have abused their power. In the mid-1990s, Indonesians tended to think of Suharto as the leader who has raised per capita incomes from a meager $75 in 1966 to around $1,000, rather than as a general who incarcerated thousands of political prisoners on a remote island in the 1970s, or who may have ordered the extrajudicial killings of criminals in the mid-1980s. Mahathir’s sweep of 162 out of 192 parliamentary seats in the April 1995 elections suggested that voters were unperturbed by the detention without trial of key opposition figures in 1987. ‘Make no mistake, this can only be interpreted as a thundering endorsement of Mahathir and no one else. He’s got the mandate to lead the country into the twenty-first century’, observed a Malaysian university lecturer inclined towards the opposition after the election.²

Political parties, elections, parliament and the cabinet all seem to be treated as casually as theatre props by Suharto. In his 1988 autobiography, Suharto dwelt at length on the first elections of his rule in 1971 as a symbol of democracy. Barely a sentence
was devoted to the actual results. Mahathir Mohamad appears to have a constricted view of political freedom. According to Mahathir, the opposition’s role is one of ‘constructive criticism and engagement, not shouting your head off.’ What defines ‘shouting your head off in a notionally free society is, of course, hard to construe. (Malaysians still require a permit to hold legal political gatherings of more than five people.)

Malaysia’s Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has periodically detained his opponents, including the leader of the opposition in parliament, Lim Kit Siang, in 1987 and stands accused of eroding freedom of speech and the independence of the judiciary. Yet only a small minority of Malaysians have questioned these actions. In the 1990 elections, Chinese voters did register a token opposition to Mahathir’s ruling coalition in voting for the opposition Democratic Action Party at the federal level. Their strategy was apparently to ensure that government could be questioned in parliament to check corruption in high places, rather than to question Mahathir’s leadership. The same voters made sure of their security closer to home by returning government candidates in the state assemblies. In the April 1995 general election, Mahathir’s National Front coalition won 64 per cent of the popular vote in a crushing defeat for the opposition. Apparently, voters felt there wasn’t much need even for an effective token opposition in parliament, as the DAP saw the number of its seats halved from twenty to nine.

Of all Southeast Asians, Malaysians are perhaps the most accustomed to the notional pluralism of democratic institutions. People are represented by elected representatives in parliament and elections are held regularly. Yet, Malaysians are also among the most collectively oriented when it comes to politics—preferring to vote along communal lines, consciously preserving a system that confers more economic and political power on the Malay community and its small clique of political bosses. This appears to be part of a racial bargain that puts communal harmony and mutual prosperity above competitive or democratic urges. Many Malaysians consider that the harmony of their fragile plural society hinges on strong, uncompromising leadership. When asked if he ever envisaged a Chinese party coming to power, the Chinese leader of a small pro-government party in Malaysia explained: ‘We prefer strong leadership. A strong leader won’t succumb to racial sentiment or religious dogma.’
In Thailand, popular perceptions of how best the interests of the majority are served by the political leadership tend to vary. A period of strong, uncompromising leadership, demonstrated by a succession of military strongmen from the 1950s through to the 1970s, generated calls for more democracy. It was also a time of economic hardship. Thais have experienced a gentler, more democratic form of government under two elected prime ministers since the late 1980s, and enjoyed the fruits of rapid economic growth. But remarkably, by the mid 1990s with the infrastructure of Bangkok coming apart at the seams, Thais were clamouring for the return of firm, decisive leadership.

Opinion polls ahead of the July 1995 elections in Bangkok consistently showed that people looked back fondly on the two short governments of non-elected prime minister Anand Panyarachun. ‘To business people and professionals like myself, Anand showed leadership and took initiatives’, commented a middle class university lecturer in Bangkok. Anand was appointed prime minister in the wake of a military coup in 1991, without a popular mandate. However, the former diplomat and bureaucrat turned businessman combined two qualities Thais admire: ability and integrity. Gathering a group of technocrats around him, he introduced economic reforms and set about proscribing the military’s role in politics. His elected successor, Chuan Leekpai, a lawyer from southern Thailand, rode a wave of popularity because of his pledge to institutionalise democracy and the rule of law. Two and a half years later Chuan’s government fell before an opposition censure vote, backed by popular opinion, which perceived his government as weak and indecisive.

Anand showed leadership. His critics say that he has an authoritarian streak. Yet, his administration is fondly remembered, and even yearned for again. Endless bickering among the fragile elected coalitions that succeeded Anand has made for a lively and pluralistic parliament, but has not solved Bangkok’s traffic woes. Urban gridlock is now beginning to threaten prosperity. The Thai Farmers Bank now estimates that Bangkok’s traffic chaos shaves off 2.7 per cent in potential GDP growth annually. Bangkok people have grown weary of politicians who bicker in parliament and talk about the problems of their rural constituencies, while no decisions are taken to alleviate the problems in the capital. Speaking ahead of July 1995 elections, a political party leader suggested that: ‘In the next election, people
will vote for the quality of leadership rather than the quality of democracy.'7 Apparently, Thais had forgotten what excessively strong leadership can do to a democracy not yet firmly anchored in institutional terms. The election brought to power a conservative coalition led by the Chart Thai Party. Many members of the new government had been accused of corruption, or sided with the military junta brought down in May 1992.

What explains this acquiescence to power, specifically the power of leadership? Manipulation of the electoral system through vote buying tells part of the story, at least in the Thai context. The cost of the July 1995 elections, in terms of money spent on vote buying, is thought by Thai Farmers Bank to have exceeded US$ 8 million. Image-building around the symbolism of strong leadership also plays a role. For, as we shall see, respect for strong leadership inherent in Southeast Asian societies has more to do with paternalistic traditions of authority than with any modern concepts of popular sovereignty. For in Southeast Asia it is not always easy to detect ‘the endless and elusive process of calling power into account’.8

Leadership is of course indispensable in any political system. In Western liberal democracies, strong leadership is regarded more ambivalently, both as the *sine qua non* of effective government, and an invitation to tyranny. Italy’s fascist dictator Benito Mussolini made the trains run on time but persecuted his people. Ultimately the Italian people preferred late trains. In Southeast Asia strong leaders like Indonesia’s President Suharto have jailed political opponents and sanctioned the extrajudicial killings of alleged criminals. According to Amnesty International as many as 350 political detainees were still held in prisons throughout Indonesia in 1994. In his ghost-written autobiography, Suharto described the extrajudicial killings of alleged criminals as ‘shock therapy’ that was necessary ‘so that the general public would understand that there was still someone capable of taking action...’.9 In neighbouring Malaysia, successive prime ministers have enhanced their executive powers while curbing the independence of the judiciary and the freedom of the press.10 Yet even considering these curbs on freedom, the brand of strong leadership exercised by men like Suharto and Mahathir apparently enjoys forbearance for the time being.

Strong leadership has been a key factor undergirding Southeast Asia’s remarkable political stability. But untrammelled
executive authority is also blamed for the widespread prevalence of corruption and woeful lack of initiative in these societies. Experienced foreign business executives in the region reflect this ambivalent view: complaining about the lack of political freedom that stifles creativity and breeds corruption, but agreeing that without strong leadership nothing would ever get done. Strong leadership is considered both an asset and a liability to states in the region and as such is one of the most intriguing aspects of indigenous political culture.

In this chapter we will ask why this seems to be the case, by looking principally at Indonesia’s President Suharto and Malaysia’s Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. Suharto, who became President in 1968, and Mahathir who succeeded Prime Minister Hussein Onn in 1981, are the longest ruling leaders in the region. In different ways both men have combined harsh and uncompromising attitudes towards political freedom with remarkably liberal economic policies. They are good examples of strong leaders who have modernised their countries while wielding power through a blend of modern and traditional ways. In the terminology of the Indonesian and Malay culture, they are Bapak, an honorific title which connotes a wise but powerful father figure. Mahathir has yet to formally acquire the title of Bapak earned by Malaysia’s founding Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, but in 1983 Suharto was formally proclaimed Bapak pembangunan, the father of development. The mid-1980s also marked the beginning of a long period of minimal challenge to the style of his rule. Becoming a Bapak means acquiring an aura of respect and legitimacy which says much about the culture of leadership. What are the historical antecedents of this culture of leadership, and what if anything do they tell us about the style of contemporary leaders in Southeast Asia?

THE HIDDEN LINK: TRADITIONAL MONARCHY AND MODERN LEADERSHIP

Southeast Asia did not acquire a model of leadership from the West in the same way it inherited parliaments and constitutions. The culture of strong leadership in Southeast Asia evolved out of indigenous models of kingship. Most polities in the region were kingdoms at one time or another. Indeed, Southeast Asia remains one of the last bastions of monarchy. Brunei, Cambodia, Malaysia
and Thailand constitute a good portion of the world’s remaining kingdoms. Perhaps more importantly, all these monarchs wield considerably more influence than their constitutional cousins in Europe and Japan. In Brunei, the Sultan is also Prime Minister and actually rules the tiny oil-rich sultanate. Until 1994, the Malaysian King could still withhold assent from a government bill and prevent it from becoming law. In Thailand, as we have seen, the King is the single most important unifying factor in the political firmament. He has discreetly helped resolve political conflicts, and has more recently directly chided a sitting elected government.

The ideal of the leader as a ‘father of the people’, the exemplary centre of the realm and source of all moral authority and the well-being of the state, has its origins in traditional Southeast Asian kingship. The central feature of the monarchy in premodern Southeast Asia was its sacral power. ‘In older Southeast Asian belief, writes Anthony Reid, ‘all power was spiritual. The powerful chief or ruler was the one who best controlled the cosmic forces.’ The notion of the divine king in Southeast Asia possibly developed as a means of expressing the abstraction of religion. The crude stone symbols of early God cults inspired rituals which conferred tangible form on these early religions. From here it was a short step to the conferment of divine status on the community leader, as the mediator, or communicator, between divine and profane worlds. In the Javanese language the words meaning God and Lord (pengirran and gusti) in the religious domain, are also applied to the royal courts where they mean prince and princely lord.

With the growth of state power which, fuelled by trade and commerce, reached its apogee in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, came the elevation of the monarch as the symbolic embodiment of the state. As the central focus of the state, the monarch was both the spiritual and temporal source of harmony. Without his spiritual powers, chaos and darkness threatened. Without his power to organise corvée labour—by demanding the services of all able bodied men for a specific period—the hydraulic agricultural regime would suffer and armies could not be raised. In modern Southeast Asian societies this moral interpretation of legitimate leadership has arguably been passed on, surviving in a cultural context, and has bred an innate acceptance of being subject to legitimate leadership without questioning its strength or accountability.
In the temporal context, the monarch was also the chief merchant of the state, a monopolist *par excellence*. In Thailand, state control over trade was established as far back as the fifteenth century and was formally enforced until the middle of the nineteenth century. As the state’s principal trader, the Thai king amassed huge profits from the sale of imports. He also made huge sums on goods secured as tribute from outlying vassal states which were consigned to merchants for sale and export. This synergy between the spiritual and real world functions of the ruler meant that once ordained, it not only became difficult to question the leader’s wisdom or right to rule on spiritual grounds, but also pretty hard to match his command of resources.

The role played by strong leaders has perhaps had the greatest impact on socio-cultural attitudes towards power and authority. What is often taken as a submission to leadership bred by the weight of authority, may stem from a popular conception of how leaders should be regarded. Revolting against the king in precolonial times meant violating religious as well as political sanctions and therefore interfering with the harmony of the state. It is a theme that runs through one of the most influential literary works of the Asian world, the *Bhagwad Gita*:

> It is indeed here on the battlefield, Arjuna, that you are faced with the most crucial and difficult decision a *ksatria* knight must make. Is it right to take drastic measures to oppose tyranny and despotism, which frequently appear in the guise of the more noble values so dear to your heart? Or, on the other hand, should a true knight hesitate to combat tyranny simply because he is bewitched by their guise of nobility and kinship?¹²

Ambivalent attitudes towards those who question legitimate authority are a marked feature of the region’s political culture. In Malaysia, intellectuals still debate whether the actions of a fifteenth-century Malay prince, Hang Jebat, who rebelled against the authority of the Sultan of Malacca were justified. In Indonesia, rebellion or usurping power in any way carries a negative connotation, associated either with banditry or religious fanaticism. In the official accounts of the 30 September 1965 coup attempt which brought down the country’s first president, Sukarno, there is no suggestion that the army’s moves to restore order were aimed
at overthrowing Sukarno. In fact, Suharto and his clique waited almost three years before effecting a formal transfer of power. Even in the contemporary Indonesian political context, an individual who questions authority is usually described as ‘mentally unstable’. Confronted by one or two Indonesian demonstrators in a crowd outside the Indonesian embassy while on a visit to Germany in early 1995, Suharto’s angry response was to consider them ‘insane’.

However, it would be wrong to assume that the semi-divine monarchs of pre-colonial Southeast Asia enjoyed untrammelled power. In fact, the extent of their writ may have been rather more circumscribed than early European observers of ‘oriental despotism’ presumed. Often the strength and power of a monarch depended as much on the strength and virtue of his personality, as on the mechanism for wielding power at his disposal. A good modern example would be Thailand’s King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who celebrates 50 years on the throne in 1996. The throne he ascended in 1946 was still in the throes of recovering from the constitutional revolution of 1932, which abolished the absolute monarchy. It is not easy to discuss the politics of monarchy in contemporary Thailand. However, many Thais would privately agree that set against the legacy of 1932, the strength and popularity of the current monarch is very much a reflection of his energetic dedication to duty. The King’s popularity, constantly reinforced by his tireless dedication to the country’s development, has allowed him to intervene in times of crisis and not draw criticism or any suggestion that he has stepped beyond the bounds of his constitutional role.

The limits to the power of traditional authority allude to important ways in which modern authoritarian successors are also limited in the exercise of their power. In one of the earliest records of Thai monarchy, the late thirteenth century ‘Ramkhamhaeng’ inscription, the King of the early Thai Kingdom of Sukhothai was reported to be accessible to his subjects in the following manner:

He has hung a bell in the opening of the gate over there: if any commoner in the land has a grievance which sickens his belly and gripes his heart, and which he wants to make known to his ruler and lord, it is easy; he goes and strikes the bell which the king has hung there; King Ramkhamhaeng...
hears the call; he goes and questions the man, examines the case, and decides it justly for him.\textsuperscript{13}

Was this merely an early example of political doublespeak? Would a revered and powerful leader like Ramkhamhaeng, who claimed vassal states as far south as the Malay peninsular, really ‘go’ and question his supplicants? Was he really that powerful?

The historian David Wyatt speculates that early Thai society was much more horizontally stratified than in later epochs when a strict hierarchy evolved around the court and its attendant bureaucracy.\textsuperscript{14} The Japanese scholar Yoneo Ishii speculates that Thai kings enjoyed only partial control over their subjects. From his intriguing study of rice-cultivation in medieval Thailand, he discovered that the scope for state intervention in agriculture was constrained by the unusually fertile environment of the Thai central flood plain, which gave common people more autonomy over the means of production by not relying on state-sponsored irrigation works. This, he says, was something less than the despotic ‘hydraulic societies’ described by Karl Wittfogel in ancient Mesopotamia. Assured agrarian subsistence enabled communities to escape dependence on the central government.\textsuperscript{15} Strong traditions of local autonomy are also found in Vietnam, where the saying went that the emperor’s writ stopped at the village gate.

Royal power was also proscribed by the difficulty of enforcing allegiance upon outlying vassal states, which meant that territorial boundaries remained fluid until the improvement of infrastructure and communications in the nineteenth century. Travellers often found that passports issued by the central government in, say, Pagan (the Burmese capital), or Ayudhya and later Bangkok in Thailand, were ineffective unless sanctioned by local warlords. Territorial control and even the measure of authority over individual ‘citizens’ was rather vaguely defined in the pre-colonial history of these states. In other words, the tradition of despotism ascribed to the early political culture of Southeast Asia was much exaggerated. As the historian Anthony Reid aptly surmised:

\begin{quote}
The exalted rhetoric of Southeast Asian rulers was always in tension with the tenuousness of their power base.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

So while there was no formal social contract between the ruler and the ruled, no ruler wielded absolute power. It could be that as
society became less influenced by Hinduistic notions of the sacral power of monarchs (a development prompted by the arrival of populist religions including Islam and Theravada Buddhism), the monarchs themselves had to rely more on their ‘personal ability—military as well as moral prestige—and economic wealth’. What has often confused the outside observer is the sustained importance of symbolic power. Pre-modern rulers maintained their authority using the tools of culture and religion. Power was turned into an aspect of collective morality and identity—enabling rulers to justify their rule in the name of tradition and religion. The traditional ruler’s actual power may have been tenuous, but for society it was important for the ruler to uphold an image of power to fulfil his other-worldly role as the focus of moral and cosmic order. Perhaps this helps explain why in contemporary Southeast Asian politics, appearances are everything.

The model of power and authority derived from the monarchy in Southeast Asia possesses one important and enduring asset. Because leadership carries moral weight, society needs less convincing of its legitimacy in a temporal context. Modern leaders in the post-colonial period have translated the moral ingredients of traditional leadership into the contemporary jargon of politics. Following the nationalist struggle, with its vision of freedom from tyranny, they added ‘visions’ of development and fully-attained social harmony, usually envisaging a prosperous arcadia in a not too immediate future—the implication being that once the vision is sanctified, so also is the leadership that conveys the vision. Indonesia has long-term development plans lasting 25 years, Malaysia’s Mahathir launched an ambitious plan for the future in 1992 which he called ‘Vision 2020’. Not only do these visions of nationhood strengthen the legitimacy of modern leaders in a temporal sense, they also imply a degree of moral control over the people that is not too distant from the ancient concept of the God-King or devaraja as the ‘exemplary centre’ of the realm.

IN THE SHADOW OF MODERN DEVARAJAS

The survival of traditional Southeast Asian monarchy is most striking in the case of Thailand. King Bhumibol inherited a throne in 1946 that had barely survived the upheaval of 1932 which brought an end to the absolute monarchy. During the brief reign of Bhumibol’s elder brother, who was a minor when he was
crowned, the throne endured a period of infringed sovereignty under the Japanese during the Pacific War. The weak throne enhanced the power of Thailand’s political elite, and the young King’s absence from Thailand for the first four years of his reign suggested an insecure position. By the 1970s, however, King Bhumibol had restored much of the Thai throne’s former prestige—and power—if not formally, then through popular respect. Some historians attribute this revival of royal influence to the machinations of military politicians who harnessed the monarchy to legitimise their political power. But there can be no doubt that King Bhumibol’s own astuteness played a major role. From the start of his reign he deployed the prestige of the monarchy to good effect, impressing foreigners and Thais alike with his dedication to duty and concern for the country’s development.

Modern Cambodia has witnessed a similar revival of monarchy with traces of an absolute tradition. In the aftermath of the Cambodian peace settlement and democratic elections in 1993, King Norodom Sihanouk was described as ‘the only figure revered by all sides in Cambodia, and the key to peace and stability in a country now enjoying a tenuous peace after 13 years of bloody civil war…’. Within a year of his reascending the throne in August 1993, King Sihanouk was holding traditional mass audiences with the people (savanaka cheahmoireastr). These royal audiences notionally offered ordinary Cambodians the chance to present petitions to their King. Potentially this enabled the King to bypass the squabbling politicians in the governing coalition—something King Sihanouk showed little inclination to do in a serious way. Remarkably enough, a local pro-government newspaper commented that the mass audiences ‘served to mark the return of the Devaraja as the all-important figure in a Buddhist polity’. Where royal power and authority has been eroded, or extinguished altogether, there has been no rush to install popularly-elected heads of state as the best expression of democratic government. Executive authority developed in place of the monarchy has often acquired distinctly monarchical characteristics. Thus while it is tempting to consider Indonesia’s government as army dominated, it might be more accurate to concur with the Dutch anthropologist Neils Mulder that:
in spite of election rituals, the current president has styled himself more and more after the Javanese sultans of old, initiating a kind of monarchical control that legitimates the claim to constituting the exemplary centre of the realm, which thus also justifies the attempt to exercise moral control of the population.20

One significant feature of this kind of leadership is the attempt it makes to fit both modern and ancient models of authority. President Suharto follows the country’s constitution to the letter. He appears before an elected national assembly, presents budgets, presides over monthly cabinet meetings, and holds elections once every 5 years. From a distance, the president of the republic is a model constitutional chief executive. Closer scrutiny of these modern political institutions, however, reveals almost no system of checks and balances against the abuse of executive power. The national consultative assembly elected once every 5 years is packed with government nominees, and all candidates have to be carefully screened. Quinquennial elections are stage managed by the government-backed Golkar Party, which ensures that the country’s 4 million government civil servants vote for Golkar.21

Now take a closer look at President Suharto. Although apparently living in a modest one-storey bungalow in a leafy suburb of downtown Jakarta, the humble facade masks an extensive complex of rooms and courtyards which extends back almost two blocks. A visit to the village of his birth on the outskirts of the royal capital of Jogyakarta reveals a village residence mimicking the layout of an old Javanese ‘kraton’ or palace. He had a large family mausoleum built near his birthplace in Central Java. Costing around US$ 1 million, the tomb emulated the custom of Javanese royalty who are buried on hill-tops.22 Also in the tradition of the old sultans, Suharto is rarely seen making policy publicly. His ministers troop out of the president’s simple wood-panelled office—austere, but for a curious gold-plated telephone—and reveal what, ‘in his wisdom’, the president has ‘revealed’ or ‘ordered’. When he talks directly to the people his manner is paternalistic to the point of condescension. He once told a gathering that people were complaining so much they were forgetting the virtue of ‘gratitude’.23

There is no denying the stultifying intellectual deficit this kind of leadership has imposed on Indonesian officials. No one likes to
take initiatives and everything is referred up. The more power Suharto has accumulated, the less willing his ministers are to cross him. It has even become difficult for advisers to advise him: no one wants to be the harbinger of bad news. The fear driving this reticence is not a product of Suharto’s repressive powers, but more a function of the remarkable concentration of patronage in his hands. Indonesian officials are haunted by the prospect of losing status. Like courtiers in a medieval court, Suharto’s ministers vie for the president’s ear; and when they have it, mutter the political equivalent of sweet nothings. In an earlier study of Suharto’s power, this author argued that among Suharto’s key talents has been his ability to defuse threats to his rule and then mostly co-opt his opponents. Suharto’s command of the resources required to buy off political challenges is far greater than anybody else’s.

Strong leadership in Indonesia implies power over resources—the power to dispense favours. There is always the fear that dissent will leave the dissenter cut off from the system—out of the resource loop. No one else will help you if the leader has cut you off. There is no recourse through the courts or parliament. When the former youth and sports minister Abdul Ghaffur was inexplicably dropped from the cabinet in 1988, he felt very much out of the loop. The hapless Ghaffur spent the next 5 years in the political wilderness. He even went to the length of writing a sycophantic biography of Suharto. The president rewarded him with a newspaper editorship.

The power of patronage flowing from the leadership can have remarkable effects on people opposed to the leadership. One of Suharto’s oldest and most bitter opponents is former armed forces commander General Abdul Haris Nasution. Nasution is credited with being the chief strategist of Indonesia’s guerrilla campaign against the Dutch during the 1945–9 revolutionary war. Considered one of the fathers of the Indonesian army, Nasution narrowly missed being rounded up and murdered on the night of 30 September 1965. His survival made him the highest ranking officer in the struggle to restore order. Yet Nasution inexplicably never stepped forward to fill the power vacuum. Possibly this was a tactical reluctance—Suharto was also bashful about assuming power; it took him 3 years before he was proclaimed president in 1968. At any rate, Nasution opposed the way Suharto and his clique seemed bent on brushing aside what little was left
of Indonesia’s democracy. They ended up as bitter opponents, with Nasution consigned to quiet retirement.

For opposition figures and senior officers in the army disenchanted with Suharto, Nasution became a beacon of hope as well as a source of ideas. They would quietly visit his modest little house in central Jakarta and talk about politics. Almost a quarter of a century later, Suharto apparently decided the time had come for a reconciliation. The man who had staunchly opposed Suharto from the same modest house where he had almost met his death, was now summoned to a gathering of senior army officers at the Merdeka Palace in central Jakarta in late 1993. At first Nasution was defiant. He came armed with a petition. But just as Nasution was about to produce his list of grievances, Suharto excused himself, and did not return. Nasution left a bitter man, perhaps most of all because he knew the game Suharto had played. He was rehabilitated. He was now shaded by the umbrella of power again. He could never be critical about Suharto in quite the same way, as this would appear unseemly and ungrateful.24

For the business community, Suharto’s firm leadership represents stability. Strong leadership offers entrepreneurs a stable platform on which to build prosperity. Many of them are Indonesian Chinese who are insecure about their rights and privileges before the law and in society; an element of power that is unaccountable to law ironically offers them more security. Perhaps that is why the Malaysian Chinese are among Mahathir’s staunchest allies, and why Thailand’s Chinese community traditionally drew close to the monarchy. Anthony Reid points out that traditional rulers in sixteenth-century Southeast Asia, relied extensively on foreigners because they posed no threat to their power as they were excluded from the polity.25

The tradition survives in the form of the close ties between overseas Chinese entrepreneurs, always vulnerable to bouts of resentment from the indigenous population, and the leadership in most states of the region. Their inherent insecurity also explains why there was more nervousness than relief in the Indonesian business community when the late 1980s saw political issues debated more openly and the succession question was raised. Talking about succession made the business community nervous. ‘People are interested in stage-managing the succession because they are not sure the masses can be controlled’, suggested a young liberal politician in late 1990. He saw the middle classes favouring
a de-coupling of politics from the masses and less support for the idea of a full democracy. Instead he predicted that what they wanted from the succession was ‘a responsive and friendly leadership’. As in the medieval period, absolutism in modern Southeast Asia tends to draw strength from the pluralistic nature of commerce.

In Malaysia, where the Western-style constitution made politics off limits to the traditional Malay sultans, the Malay political elite has adopted the political jargon of absolute monarchy. The term for civil government is *kerajaan* (literally ‘of the King’), people are expected to respect its *kedaulatan* (sovereignty) and pay it *setia* (loyalty or homage). Since recovering from a perilous challenge to his power in 1987, Mahathir’s leadership has been more or less unquestioned. Not just on the basis of his mandate from the UMNO party, which holds party elections every three years, but more obviously from the popular legitimacy he derives from the economic growth his government has presided over.

Malaysia has experienced growth rates over 8 per cent for over a decade. Growth and prosperity offer the kind of security to people they seem unwilling to gamble with at the ballot box. Despite accusations of gerrymandering and unfair treatment of the opposition in the media, there is no arguing about the margin of victory Mahathir achieved in the 1995 election. Having seen his Democratic Action Party lose 11 of their seats in parliament, Malaysia’s opposition leader Lim Kit Siang said that ‘he accepted the people’s verdict’. Tempting as it is to consider the landslide as a rational verdict, it could also be considered as the recognition of Mahathir’s leadership as distinct from the strength of his party — a form of moral legitimacy transcending the electoral process and harking back to the days of the Malay sultanate.

Rather less successfully in Burma, the ruling military junta known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council, is struggling to achieve this traditional form of legitimacy—without resorting to the ballot box. Ignoring a generally free and fair election in 1990 won by a civilian coalition, the Burmese army set up the ruling council of senior officers and promised to draw up a new constitution and political system at a later date. While the army does not lack the tools of repression to keep the populace cowed—Human Rights Watch/Asia, a US based human rights organisation, estimates that 1,000 political prisoners were held in Burmese jails
in mid-1995—the chief concern seems to be to establish legitimacy by promoting prosperity.

For Burma’s ruling generals, development and foreign investment are considered more important goals than granting political freedom to the population. In their eyes, a wealthier population will be more interested in accumulating more wealth than in holding political opinions. The priorities are quite strikingly counterpoised. On the one hand the military junta is prepared to allow foreign companies to own 100 per cent of their subsidiaries in Burma and play the black market; yet ordinary Burmese can be jailed for up to 4 years for handling foreign currency and are told that modernisation of the political system must wait. While foreign businessmen generally look upon Burma as a country with significant potential as an emerging market, and tend to downplay the brutality of the regime, ordinary Burmese continue to be questioned by military intelligence officials when they meet with foreigners.

Clearly the SLORC considers that, following the example of Indonesia’s military regime, political legitimacy will grow out of economic success rather than the ballot box. In this sense, one of the more significant and effective statements made by Burmese democratic leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi on her release from house arrest in July 1995 was that foreign investors should not ‘rush’ into Burma. Yet even the US-based human rights organisation, Human Rights Watch/Asia aired doubts about the effectiveness of her plea. Many commentators saw her release as a measure of the SLORC’s confidence and ability to control the country. In a report published shortly after her release in July, the organisation said it was
difficult...to know whether the release of Daw Suu will lead to an improvement or lead only to further entrenchment as the SLORC achieves its main aim of increased international investment and economic aid and, as a result, finds less and less need to heed the calls from the international community.

It has been suggested that the evil genius of totalitarian leadership lies in its profound awareness that human personality cannot tolerate moral isolation, and that offering membership of a community is the key to maintaining absolute power. It was precisely this ability to obviate questioning of the system by
convincing individuals to fear existence without the system, which many thought made the Soviet Union under Communist Party rule self-perpetuating. Its downfall, the critics now say, was economics — the inability of that system to turn a profit in the global marketplace. In Southeast Asia, authoritarian models of power thrive precisely because they guarantee a profit. Perhaps no better example of this can be found in contemporary Malaysia.

MAHATHIR MOHAMAD: FINESSING MORAL AUTHORITY

The executive offices of Malaysia’s United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) occupy the top two floors of a thirty-six storey tower known as the World Trade Centre in the heart of Kuala Lumpur. Here on the thirty-sixth floor, usually on the first Wednesday of every month, Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohamad holds a meeting of his ruling party’s supreme council. He presides over the meeting from an oversized swivel chair set at the end of a long hardwood table. Behind the chair hangs a portrait of himself making a speech, flanked on either side by the flags of all nine Malaysian states. Contrasting with the idealised heroic image of Mahathir on the canvas, the real Mahathir slouches, languidly playing with a pen as he allows the chair to swivel left and right. He wears a half-smile that comes across as an expression of contempt for his least favourite profession (after lawyers): the fourth estate. ‘So, any questions?’, he asks after a making a brief statement. With a reverence verging on the sycophantic, the assembled reporters politely tender their questions. Mahathir’s responses are also polite, but terse. The overall effect is to convey a sense of impatience. He wears the expression of a young man in a hurry to get things done, to move on to the next job. His bright, constantly darting eyes are not at all the eyes of a man in his late sixties who has had heart bypass surgery. Of political writers, he recently coined the term Pelacur tulis, which translates from the Malay as ‘Whore writers’. In the presence of Malaysia’s leader for the past 14 years, it is easy to forget that he holds the office of Prime Minister, that he is not the titular head of state, or that he is accountable to his cabinet, parliament and his party.

In a short story entitled ‘Piem’, Malaysian writer Shahnon Ahmad parodied the national political scene as a long play in
which there were many roles, but none of any significance except for the central figure of ‘Piem’. “There were those’, Shahnon wrote, ‘who criticised the play for being a one man show, even though there were many parts.’ Using direct and sometimes coarse language, the story ends with the ugly demise of ‘Piem’ at the hands of the other actors, who finally realise that they— rather than ‘Piem’—have the most important role in the drama. It isn’t hard to detect the object of Shahnon’s parody. Mahathir is popularly known as ‘PM’, short for Prime Minister. The title conveys as much power and status in the contemporary Malaysian context, as ‘President’ might do in a Republic. Indeed, Mahathir’s actual powers would make many kings and presidents envious. He is concurrently Prime Minister and Home Minister, which gives him overall control of the police and the civil service.

Shahnon Ahmad’s parody crudely captures the essence of the culture of power in modern Malaysia. Mahathir’s power verges on the absolute: he commands total control over a political party that is the most powerful element in a multiparty coalition that holds a healthy two-thirds majority in parliament. He has been described as ‘a reluctant swing man charting the route to greater democratic openness. While he valued the legitimation of his rule through electoral victory, it was not clear that he was so committed to democratic norms that he would accept electoral defeat.’ But it would be unfair to attribute the growth of this power solely to Mahathir. His three predecessors as prime minister similarly developed authoritarian habits within the framework of Malaysia’s parliamentary democracy. The prevailing political culture of Malay society has played a key role in allowing them to do so.

When an opposition motion sneaks past the speaker’s inclination not to ‘waste parliament’s time’, assembled government MPs make speeches attacking it for being ‘anti-Malaysian’ and ‘disrespectful towards PM’. The two are almost synonymous. Criticising ‘PM’ often calls for an abject retraction. When one of his own party officials recently dared to question a Mahathir decision, he was shouted down and described as ‘uncouth’. In the Malay cultural context, power must be absolute to command loyalty. In a society which considers direct access to power as a way of acquiring wealth or protecting interests, it doesn’t pay for a leader to play the humble servant of the people. Because the people will soon cast around for a figure who exudes more power. When Mahathir’s
ambitious and politically astute young lieutenant Anwar Ibrahim won the deputy presidency of the ruling UMNO party in November 1993 there were already those who perceived Mahathir’s power to be waning. Some even replaced the requisite icon-like photographs they had taken of themselves with Mahathir with pictures taken alongside Anwar—a decision they may have regretted after Mahathir’s landslide victory at the polls in April 1995.

Mahathir is perhaps the most striking example of a Southeast Asian leader who projects himself as modern and progressive, yet who wields power, consciously or otherwise, in a traditional manner. The same could be said of Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore and Suharto in Indonesia. Lee of course has been quite open about blending Confucian Chinese values with the intellectual acrobatics of the Oxbridge debating society. Lee’s culture of power is consciously bifurcated. Suharto’s is less so. As described above, his use of traditional Javanese political devices is barely disguised by a thin veil of modern constitutionalism.

Mahathir’s style is, however, more complex and perhaps less consciously executed. More importantly, Malaysian society—specifically the dominant Malay culture—has had much to do with the evolution of Mahathir’s style of rule. A Malay politician laments the strength of a culture in which ‘the liberal element is so weak and the collective element is so strong, creating a society in which no one is prepared to defend the role of the individual’. At worst Mahathir’s style of politics represents the way ruling elites dress up authoritarian rule in a constitutional suit of clothes. At best, it reflects Malaysian popular perceptions of how power should be wielded, whatever the intentions of those in power. Ironically, Mahathir himself alluded to this problem in his outspoken 1970 treatise The Malay Dilemma. ‘The Prime Minister in particular became so powerful both by virtue of his office and by popular acclaim,’ he noted, referring to the long and popular term served by Malaysia’s founding Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, ‘that the party became subservient to the person.’ ‘The general feeling’, he wrote, ‘was that whether or not the Parliament sat, the Government would carry on.’

Many people see Mahathir as a maverick politician. Trained as a medical doctor in Singapore, he developed a passion for politics in the heady days of anti-colonial sentiment during the Pacific War. Some say his father, a stern school teacher, was an admirer of the
pro-Axis Indian nationalist Subash Chandra Bose. This could explain Mahathir’s later obsession with drawing away from the West and ‘looking East’ to Japan. Like others of his generation, the young Mahathir was inspired by Sukarno’s passionate anti-colonial rhetoric. At the time, there were not many Malay households in Malaya without a picture of the Indonesian leader. He joined UMNO in his early twenties at its birth in 1946. But this was a time when the Malay elite was dominated by suave, British-educated anglophiles—those the calculating British rulers wanted to see assume the reins of power once they left, so that British economic interests could be preserved.

In this context, Mahathir must indeed have appeared something of a radical. He was ejected from the party in the late 1960s for criticising the leadership, and spent some years in what is now reverently termed the wilderness. Mahathir’s view, propounded with brutal frankness in his Malay Dilemma, was that the Malays would never dominate their own land if they remained subservient to the immigrant Chinese and Indians brought to Malaya by the British to serve the colony as merchants, clerks and labourers. To this day, academics write regular newspaper columns to disprove the notion that the ‘gentle’ Malays tilled the land, while the immigrants made their fortunes in trade. In his most recent treatise, The Asia that can say No, a book co-written with maverick Japanese legislator and outspoken nationalist Shintara Ishihara, Mahathir demonstrates remarkable continuity of thought:

> It is possible for Asia to create a cultural region of unmatched historical greatness. What is important is that we consciously strive to maintain our value systems. If we do so, we will never come under European domination again.\(^{30}\)

Mahathir gleans many of these ideas from a wide range of popular reading. ‘He reads a lot, but not deeply’, reveals an academic who has advised Mahathir in the past. ‘Much of it is popular material which doesn’t give him the full grasp of the context.’\(^{31}\) This could explain why the Japan Mahathir knows it is a country pioneering a successful management strategy; not how they achieved it by borrowing from the West.

It would be simple enough to dismiss Mahathir as a demagogue. There are indeed shades of a latter-day Sukarno—blasting away at the forces of imperialism. A former US ambassador in Kuala
Lumpur considered that Mahathir had aspirations to play on a bigger stage. ‘If you sum it all up, he’s looking for a place in the sun and history; looking for a lasting international title to go along with his domestic title.’\(^{32}\) A more charitable view from one of his own diplomats is that Mahathir ‘sincerely believes in his ideas. He is not looking for leadership, but genuinely believes some things need to be said.’\(^{33}\) But like Sukarno, focusing on the oratory bravado fails to explain Mahathir’s political strength and popularity at home. (He has won five general elections in a row.) Perhaps more accurately Mahathir exemplifies the ‘good ruler’ of Southeast Asian tradition. The ruler whose power becomes magnified by popular acclaim because he delivers wealth and security to his subjects—the absence of which brought Sukarno down.

Apart from the obvious link between political strength and economic welfare, we find in Mahathir’s style of leadership a model of power which conveys a curious form of benevolence: one which strikes hard and ruthlessly at enemies of the state, justifying the uncompromising use of power in terms of nationalism and loyalty, but which rewards its faithful servants more than amply. Recent Malaysian history is shot through with expressions of both sides in this culture of power. On one side there was undermining of the country’s independent judiciary in the late 1980s because it dared to question the legal propriety of the country’s leadership.\(^{34}\) On the other side of the equation there is a string of millionaires who have built their fortunes on political patronage. One need not look far to find the direct link with the historical Malay tradition. At UMNO party assemblies for the past few years large canvases painted by a local artist have hung in the assembly hall, depicting Mahathir and his party minions as heroes from the glorious Malay past.

**THE POWER OF MONOPOLY**

As with the kings of pre-colonial Southeast Asia, the success of modern leaders cannot be interpreted purely on a cultural plane. Modern Southeast Asian leaders may no longer claim semi-divine status but they have retained the propensity to monopolise the means of production. Strong leadership in Southeast Asia relies as much today on economic patronage as it does on culturally-driven respect for authority. David Steinberg suggests, for instance, that
Burma’s lurch towards socialism under the military rule of General Ne Win (a man whose belief in the traditional culture of leadership rivals that of Indonesia’s Suharto; he is said to have changed the denominations of Burma’s banknotes and the side of the road people drive, on the advice of soothsayers) can be considered ‘both as an effort to create a secular modernisation programme, and also a reversion to traditional monarchical practices’.

Socialism, Steinberg notes, allowed for heavy state intervention and the state’s monopolisation of production.

In the early years of modern statehood economic patronage, concentrated in the hands of the ruling elite, evolved with the help of strict import-substitution regimes by which access to imports was controlled through state-run monopolies. When pressure from the private sector and foreign investors forced liberal reforms on the state, governments resorted to cronyism or the use of nominees to ensure that they retained a monopolistic grip on key sectors of the economy. From the mid-1980s President Suharto’s family emerged as key players on the Indonesian corporate scene. The conglomerates established by Suharto’s three sons and eldest daughter grew rapidly on a broad base of activities extending into every conceivable sector of the economy. Sometimes the sector of the economy they played in was intrinsically profitable, like the trading of oil and natural gas; sometimes they made it so by monopolising production, as in the case of the cloves used in Indonesia’s popular kretak cigarettes, or the production of essential feedstocks for the plastics industry.

Pressure from multilateral lending agencies to shape reforms that reduce the power of monopolies have succeeded in disengaging powerful, but inefficient, state enterprises but not the hold of the Suharto family on profitable areas of the economy. In recent interviews with the press, Suharto’s eldest daughter, Siti Hardiyanti Rukmana, has defended her business activities by denying she has ever exploited state funds, and insisting that not every project up for grabs goes her way. More recently the Suharto family conglomerates have taken steps to list their holdings as public companies—most probably as a hedge against their uncertain future after Suharto has left the scene.

Less well-known are the string of cash-rich social welfare foundations which Suharto has set up, and in which he and his children serve as trustees. Here we begin to see how Suharto combines tradition with the pursuit of power more starkly. The
foundations, or yayasan, are a popular mechanism in Indonesia for marshalling wealth under the guise of philanthropy.\textsuperscript{36} Ironically, they became popular among Indonesian nationalists exploiting an old Dutch law which made money collected from donations for social purposes exempt from an audit by the state. Needless to say, the fiscal loophole persists and it is difficult to gauge how much money Suharto and his family has amassed under the yayasan umbrella.

One thing is certain, Suharto projects these foundations as proof of his munificence. The people can’t afford to provide basic welfare for themselves nor can the government do it all, he claims, in his 1988 ghost-written biography. So the funds must come from outside the government. As President, he requests the donations and decides where they are spent. In fact all civil servants have nominal monthly sums of as much as US$ 0.50c docked from their wage packet to contribute to a foundation dedicated to religious works. As with the Presidential Aid Scheme, or Inpres, the money spent on welfare is seen to come directly from Suharto, the father of the nation, to the needy villager. Government agencies and provincial authorities are bypassed, and in the process the people see their president as the font of sustenance. ‘If people say I’m rich’, Suharto declares in his biography, ‘indeed I am rich, but as the head [of these] foundations.’\textsuperscript{37} As an afterthought, he adds that 100 per cent of the money is used for social purposes.

In neighbouring Malaysia, political patronage has become more and more important as a factor in Malaysian capitalism. In his ground-breaking analysis of political involvement in Malaysian business, Edmund Gomez traces the role of the state to the implementation of the New Economic Policy in the 1970s, which sought to channel corporate ownership towards the economically weak Malay Community.\textsuperscript{38} Under the NEP the government aimed at transferring 30 per cent of the corporate sector to the Malay, or bumiputera community by 1990. Public agencies were set up to acquire corporate assets on behalf of bumiputeras, and ostensibly to train and protect bumiputera entrepreneurs. Large portions of public share issues were reserved for bumiputeras. But as Gomez points out, the promotion of communal business interests brought in communal political organisations:

As ruling ethnic-based political parties involved themselves in what were essentially rentier capitalistic pursuits, they
also became increasingly aware of the influence and power they could exert over their constituents in developing and furthering their business interests.\textsuperscript{39}

The chief beneficiary was the United Malays National Organisation, which dominates Malaysia’s multiethnic ruling coalition. UMNO’s hegemony and the centralised nature of power within the coalition and the party concentrated this wealth. In 1990 it was estimated that UMNO owned four billion Malaysian Ringgit’s worth of shares, as well as land and property worth several billion Ringgit.\textsuperscript{40} By owning as much as 2 per cent of the market capitalisation of Malaysia’s stock market, UMNO’s influence in the market was considerable. This means that share prices of UMNO-owned companies could, in theory, be artificially boosted when cash was needed for political campaigns. (UMNO members allege that funds derived from the stock market were deployed to a more limited degree by the opposition UMNO splinter party Semangat 46.) In short, the political leadership of Malaysia had access to a political automatic teller machine.

The more obvious state monopolies may be disappearing as the region’s economies liberalise and bring themselves into line with the global economy, but ruling elites are finding new ways to monopolise the nation’s wealth. Patronage that was once dished out in the form of monopolies is now distributed in the form of shares and company directorships. Mahathir’s sons are becoming tied in to major industrial development projects allied with influential entrepreneurs. A company search done in Kuala Lumpur’s registry of companies revealed in late 1993 that Mirzan Mahathir was connected with almost forty companies. In 1992, Mokhzani Mahathir bought a controlling stake in a small company called Tongkah holdings that had posted losses for 8 straight years. In the financial year to June 1994, the holding company made a profit of almost US$ 5 million and was bidding to buy a small private bank.\textsuperscript{41}

In fairness, this kind of success and exposure to the business world is just as much a product of the local, notably the Chinese, business community assuming that co-option of the ruling elite is the surest form of business security—which points to a link between the economic buoyancy and the toleration of patronage and favouritism, rather than the other way around. Favourable economic conditions grease the wheels of patronage and
keep everyone happy. Periods of economic stress make it more difficult for the leadership to keep the pie evenly divided. Neils Mulder speculates that attacks by the middle classes of Manila’s Makati business district on the Marcos regime in the Philippines, in the wake of the August 1983 Aquino assassination, may be explained by the dismal state of the economy in the early 1980s. The overheating of Indonesia’s economy in the early 1990s generated more voluble resentment about Suharto’s family businesses and the role of conglomerates owned by ethnic Chinese.

Nevertheless, strong ties between leaders and the economic elite in buoyant economic circumstances helps explain why crises of legitimacy are rare in Southeast Asia. More often than not opportunities for political change have arisen from internal factional struggles among the elite. Questioning of the system and the mass mobilisation of popular opinion are the tools one faction deploys against another in the quest for power. But once installed, the elite closes ranks, spurning the social and political sentiment stirred up in the course of the campaign in favour of the status quo. As one senior Indonesian politician warned: ‘In a political system that is not fully developed, undercurrents in society can be manipulated, engineered by individuals.’

Western analysts generally consider that the desire for popular sovereignty stems from an innate human desire for recognition and status as individuals. From this philosophical position they argue that the collective norms of Asian societies will eventually be eroded by popular demands for this recognition. From this introductory analysis of Southeast Asian models of power and authority it should be obvious that the post-colonial political development of the region has tended to reinforce rather than sweep away these collective norms. Traditional forms of authority, originating from a basic model of kingship, have by and large been recovered and recast in modern forms. The next question is how well this tradition stands up to scrutiny by those who consider Western forms of democracy as the ultimate form of political development.
Chapter 3
Differing on democracy

_Democracy is on the march everywhere in the world. It is a new day and a great moment for America._
_President Bill Clinton, 26 February 1993_

_Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of man, yet murder men everywhere they find them._
_Frantz Fanon (1961) The Wretched of the Earth_

In the words of former Japanese prime minister Keiichi Miyazawa, Southeast Asia is the economic ‘prime spot’ of the world. Yet for US lawmakers and Eurocrats from Brussels the region is something of a black spot for human freedom. In their eyes, economic success alone does not define regional stature. Political stability, enduring social harmony and prosperity are not sufficient criteria either. They want to see Southeast Asia develop more democracy and respect for a universal definition of human rights in tandem with economic prosperity—a partnership they regard as a defining mark of civilisation.

Rather than bow to a view which defines Western human values as universal, some Southeast Asian states have demurred, arguing the case for the diversity of social and political norms. At one extreme this resistance has assumed the form of a vaguely defined alternative ‘Asian model’ of development. This model takes as a starting point fundamental differences of political culture and ends up by telling the West: ‘We’re different, so don’t expect us to conform to your standards.’ On a more moderate plane, there are those Asians who accept that some of those values claimed by the West play a role in shaping Asian politics and society—but not as fundamentally as some Westerners believe. In essence, these people
are saying: ‘We drink Coca Cola, we can even make it more cheaply, but don’t subscribe to the same corporate philosophy as the Coca Cola company.’

One of the most enduring debates of the 1990s in Southeast Asia has revolved around the relevance of human rights and democracy in the post-Cold War environment of what is commonly called ‘open regionalism’. This came about as Western governments cast around for global issues after the end of the Cold War and found the human rights record of some of their former Cold War allies wanting. At the same time in Southeast Asia, once the communist threat receded, the need for foreign aid diminished, and the region’s economies became more self-sufficient, a wave of confidence swept through the region. Some politicians began asking whether they needed the West more than the West needed them. Did they need to be told that strong government hindered market forces, or that their people wanted more democracy. And should they be threatened with sanctions of various kinds for not living up to Western standards of political behaviour? In much the same way that the Western powers engaged the former communist bloc with the Helsinki process a decade earlier, the universal issue of human freedom found itself locked in combat with principles of national sovereignty. As a senior Vietnamese official aptly surmised: ‘In short, Human Rights has become a matter of international relations.’

To combat this elevation of values to the diplomatic plane, some Asian intellectuals turned to indigenous political philosophy and cultural or religious beliefs to justify rejecting Western values. From the early 1990s it became fashionable for Southeast Asian leaders to speak of a clash of cultures and traditions (before Professor Huntington’s thesis was published in 1993, though more ardently thereafter). Some political leaders were more strident than others, but the message was essentially the same: ‘We are grown-up countries now, and this does not mean we have to resemble the West.’ Does this make Southeast Asians any less civilised? Can the region become a sophisticated industrialised society using Western technology, without the wholesale adoption of Western values and attitudes in the social and political sphere? Does a political system which embraces pluralism and democratic principles have to be modelled on Western society? Or is there a cultural middle ground where contrasting approaches to what defines a civil society can be reconciled? Resolving this issue looks like being one of the key
challenges of the new world order, one which events have conspired to test in Southeast Asia —though not for the first time. Western civilisation has been trying to mould the face of Southeast Asia into a likeness of its own ever since the Jesuit missionary St Francis Xavier arrived in the Moluccas in the mid-sixteenth century. At this early stage, however, the clash was more realistically between one set of religious beliefs and another. The scurvyridden European ruffians who stumbled up coconut strewn beaches in their rough wool and leather, wielded the sword in one hand and the crucifix in the other. This was no great improvement, perhaps none at all, on the Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim traders who preceded them.

Much later, generations of colonial administrators tried to harness Southeast Asian society to European social norms and political culture. ‘As conquerors of Vietnam’, wrote the British historian Ralph Smith, ‘the French were very much aware of their mission to civilise the Vietnamese: to make their nature as well as their humanity conform to the ideals of the West.’2 The British in Burma and Malaya salved consciences pricked by their voracious exploitation of resources and labour by passing on to the benighted natives the traditions of British Common Law and the administrative propriety of the colonial civil service. Towards the end of their long rule over the Indonesian archipelago, the Dutch also offered a chosen few ‘natives’ the opportunity to ‘liberate’ themselves through education. As the historian V.G. Kiernan mused in his arresting cultural study of British colonialism: ‘By thinking the worst of their subjects, they [the colonials] avoided having to think badly of themselves.’3

Yet in most cases, this European missionary urge was frustrated by the eclectic tendencies of their host cultures, which neither rejected totally, nor absorbed fully what their colonial masters were trying to cement in place. Pioneer Indonesian nationalist Sutan Sjahrir embraced liberal European philosophy in the 1930s, claiming that the feudal proclivities of the traditional Indonesian elite would inhibit democratic development. Yet, as alluded to earlier, his conception of how democracy should work in the Indonesian context drew on his native West Sumatran traditions of collective decision-making and mutual consent. According to a recent biography, Sjahrir was associated with the view that ‘being aristocratic did not mean being individualistic’.4 Towards the end of his life, imprisoned and ill, Sjahrir seemed to confirm this more
catholic approach to Western liberalism, when he wrote in his diary:

For the time being, in fact, democracy for us cannot mean a technique of governing, and a citizen-like way of life, but mainly a guarantee against tyranny and despotism.\(^5\)

Those civilising Frenchmen fared no better in Vietnam. For as Smith noted: ‘The Vietnamese, with their tradition of eclecticism, might wish to borrow from the West; but they would always wish to remain Vietnamese.’\(^6\) Even European Marxism was perhaps interpreted by the Vietnamese with the aim of reinforcing traditional belief in Fate. Through an indigenous lens, Marx’s ‘dialectic of history’ could be regarded by the Vietnamese as the predetermined ‘Mandate of Heaven’. ‘Just as the Mandate of Heaven could in the old days pass from one dynasty to another, now the Mandate of History is held to be passing from one class to another.’\(^7\) This tendency to harmonise and adapt foreign ideas and principles rather than shun them altogether is evident throughout Southeast Asia’s history. To the outsider, the process may look like conversion. In fact, it almost always involved adaptation—leaving plenty of room for rejection. In late 1993, a Vietnamese intellectual who challenged the Hanoi government’s adherence to Marxist-Leninist ideology, claimed that Ho Chi Minh only ‘borrowed Leninism as a tool’ to fight the French colonialists and later the US military.\(^8\)

Though perhaps easily forgotten in the post-colonial era of Western foreign aid and investment Southeast Asians also experienced the darker side of Western civilisation, behaviour which cast doubt on Western claims to be civilised. ‘Lofty principles can suddenly disappear the instant the prison door is closed and the joy of the exploitation of others re-emerges’, reminds the Indonesian journalist Goenawan Mohamad.\(^9\) Something of the twisted hypocrisy of colonial notions of freedom emerges from the following conversation between the half-caste agent of Dutch imperialism and his Dutch master in Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s classic treatment of the rise of Indonesian nationalism, the *House of Glass*:

‘So, it is your opinion, Meneer, that the more ethnic organisations there are, the more opportunity there will be for
people to organise, and the better things will be for the Indies, because eventually European democratic ways will find their place in the Native world and thereby change the Native’s feudal ways?"

‘At the very least they will study how to decide things collectively. And so these organisations will also be open and above ground and we will be able to peep in through their doors or windows whenever we like.’

The notion that liberation from the feudal yoke need not diminish the capacity for social control was not lost on colonial regimes, which sought for the most part to organise society to generate wealth for the metropolitan centre, maintain order, and salve their religious consciences at the same time. It should not be forgotten that for many Southeast Asians their first taste of Western civilization was a bitter one.

The intrinsic hypocrisy of colonial rule did not stop early nationalists using Western thought to justify turning on their colonial masters to seize independence. Take the way that Sukarno synthesised Thomas Jefferson and Karl Marx to articulate his Indonesian revolution, even though his own view was that the state should be conceived as a family, with the president as the benevolent father. Ho Chi Minh modelled his revolution against the French in Vietnam along classic communist lines, yet opened his declaration of Vietnam’s independence with Jefferson’s famous words, ‘All men are created free and equal.’ Then as now, the West was viewed ambivalently in the region. Ideas and value orientations imported by the colonial powers were accepted where it was felt they furthered nationalism and progress. But there was resistance to aspects of Western culture which contravened social or religious norms. The same way these states had for centuries fended off the threat of a Chinese invasion force by paying lip-service to the universal claims of hegemony from Beijing (and profited from the tributary trade); so the Europeans were led to believe that their civilising mission was working.

In Thailand, which of course successfully resisted colonial rule, the adoption of Western values was selective and deployed as a defence against the erosion of sovereignty by the colonial powers. The 1855 Treaty of Friendship and Commerce with Britain involved the radical restructuring of monopolies controlled by the Siamese aristocracy—favouring the British traders. The
British diplomat who concluded the treaty, Sir John Bowring, was struck by how this ‘involved a total revolution in all the financial machinery of the Government’. The case of Thailand offers perhaps the finest example of the region’s pragmatic adaptability. Facing the threat of colonisation, the Thai opted to modify traditional institutions of the state. But the cost in terms of lost tradition and culture was far less than that which might have been incurred with the loss of sovereignty.

Part of the price the newly independent states of Southeast Asia paid for their freedom was a set of values and institutions governing that freedom which some nationalists sincerely believed was the only way to achieve modern statehood—others did not. Attempts in Burma and Indonesia to implement constitutions modelled on Western democratic principles on gaining independence succeeded initially, but later floundered in a quagmire of factionalism, corruption and economic inefficiency. The first signs of a return to traditional norms of political power and control emerged when the military stepped in to restore order. In Burma, General Ne Win was appointed head of the government in 1958 before seizing power in 1962. In Indonesia, an abortive coup d’état brought the army into power after 1965. The generals who seized power in these countries may have worn uniforms tailored in Western styles and wielded weapons purchased from the West, but their political ideas were very much rooted in the Eastern past.

The new constitutions these military regimes enforced enshrined notions of democracy and human rights more in name than in practice. As political power passed from those few nationalists groomed by the colonial elite to those they might have imprisoned, so regard for the advice of their former masters diminished. Traditional paternalistic notions of authority were promoted in the interests of discipline, order and development. Besides, after two world wars and the violent struggle to win independence in some countries, many Southeast Asian intellectuals found no difficulty questioning the validity of Western culture as a universal code of conduct. ‘Human rights?’; former Vietnamese foreign minister Nguyen Co Thach remarked. ‘I learnt about human rights when the French tortured me as a teenager.’

In the postwar era of independence, coinciding with the Cold War, Southeast Asians learnt that human rights and democracy were functions of which side of the new ideological
divide they opted for. ‘While human rights campaigns are portrayed as an absolute moral good to be implemented without any qualifications, in practice Western governments are prudent and selective’, suggests Singaporean diplomat Kishore Mahbubani. Countless Vietnamese and Cambodians experienced selection of one method of proving Western moral superiority when their land and villages were bombed to nothing during the second and third Indochinese wars. ‘It seems also strange somehow to us’, said Tran Quang Co, a veteran Vietnamese Communist Party leader, later a deputy foreign minister:

that such a heightened attention and concern can be shown from some quarters for a few specific cases of what they consider to be human rights violations in our country while altogether showing blithe unconcern for the unfortunate consequences that hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese whose human rights were abridged in many different ways during the war still have to suffer today. 

Political detainees in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines—the non-communist states of Southeast Asia—experienced another form of selectivity when their plight was ignored by the West because their governments became strategic assets in the Cold War era.

Similarly today, the peace dividend claimed by the West after the Cold War is not so apparent. The Cold War was won in 1989 but capitalism triumphant was overtaken by deep economic recession and unemployment. The integration of Eastern Europe with Western Europe, though presented as a triumph of democratic values over Communism, has, from a Southeast Asian perspective, generated more conflict than harmony. Many in the region would concur with Charles Maier writing in Foreign Affairs that ‘in the aftermath of 1989’s collapse of communism ...a feeling of anticlimax succeeded initial euphoria’. There is no evidence that human rights and democracy are being served by the failure to stop ethnic cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina or ethnic discrimination in France and Germany.

This perception of double standards has become a useful stick with which Southeast Asian governments can beat their critics in the West. One of the more strident promoters of this view is Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad:
When the devotion to democracy results in a stagnant economy, high unemployment and denial of the right to work and work hard; when democracy protects fascists and neo-Nazis; when the individual activist takes precedence over the silent masses then it is time to question whether we have correctly interpreted democracy.  

Mahathir’s rhetorical view that the West is distorting democracy may not sway the urbane Western-educated minority already sold on the materialistic ephemera of Western culture, but it is potentially persuasive in less privileged, less worldly-wise strata of society. Ironically enough, exposure to Western media considered as a measure of openness in Southeast Asia is allowing ordinary people of the region to witness some of the very problems with Western society their leaders would have them reject. When Cable News Network brings scenes of ethnic rioting in Los Angeles into the living rooms of Southeast Asians, they might think again about the strictures on their own political freedom—although in some countries governments are not so sure of this, so they limit access to foreign satellite broadcasts. The end of the Cold War may have been greeted as a triumph but it unlocked a whole Pandora’s Box of social and moral ills which were subliminally suppressed by the public and the media in the West when their attention was focused on the bomb and who might use it first. The mid-1990s was perhaps not the best moment in the history of Western civilisation to advertise its charms.

It was the moment, though, to cast around for demons. Just as Western pressure on the regimes of Southeast Asia has generated criticism of Western society, economic recession in the West has bred suspicion of Asia’s economic success and resilience. The late former President François Mitterrand of France told a television interviewer in February 1993 that ‘competition from Southeast Asia, which because of low prices and absence of social protection, sells everything and anything’, had caused ‘a dramatic crisis in the Western industrial world’. Sentiments like these, perhaps motivated by the search for scapegoats, have fuelled mutual suspicions, and etched out even starker differences of approach to economic and political life. A key question, therefore, is how real these differences are? Is there a case for a distinctive Asian alternative to the Western approach to a civil society? If not, is the
A NEW IDEOLOGICAL DIVIDE

After the Western powers won the Cold War, attention focused on the politics of the West’s Cold War allies. The victory over Communism encouraged a firm belief by Western governments that human rights and democracy as practised in the West should be universally embraced. Anything less is judged to be wrong and ultimately doomed to failure. Thus, undemocratic regimes the West once indulged as allies in the struggle against Communism, now find themselves under scrutiny as foreign policy agendas in Europe and the United States broaden and look for a new global role. Encapsulating this new mood, at least from a Washington perspective, one US commentator wrote in late 1992:

The demise of communism has not ended assaults on individual rights. In some areas of the world communism’s disappearance has only increased the number of actors, governmental and non-governmental, bent on depriving individuals of their rights to free speech, to security from torture, to travel and to all rights enumerated in the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. US support for those rights is the reason that, in benighted countries around the world, pictures of American presidents still hang on the walls of impoverished homes. It is the reason that Chinese students in Tiananmen Square fashioned a Goddess of Liberty like the one in New York’s harbour. Clear and consistent support for those rights can provide the foundation of America’s role in the post-communist world.17

If, as Cullen suggests, US foreign policy is now guided by a ‘moral compass’, this leaves little scope for the realpolitik of the Cold War era. Undemocratic regimes better watch out. The problem for policy-makers in Washington is that for all their cooperation during the Cold War, the countries of Southeast Asia are proving to be reluctant allies in the post-Cold War struggle for democracy. There seems to be no danger of actual conflict over the issue. There is however, the threat of an ideological gulf developing—one similar in scope, if not on the same scale, as that which divided the
world over Communism. For by stridently insisting, rightly or wrongly, that human rights and democracy are universal values, the West has forced Southeast Asian countries to adopt a defensive posture—one which ultimately could hinder the propagation of these values.

Rather than simply reject what the West prescribes, some regional regimes have begun formulating alternative definitions of human rights and democracy. Put briefly, these place the collective economic prosperity of society above the rights of individuals thus challenging the atomistic assumptions of Western political philosophy. To some extent, the roots of this particularism lie in the reassertion of traditional concepts of society and political order in the region over the past two decades outlined in Chapter 2. But there is also a sense in which the case for a distinctive approach to what constitutes a civil society in Southeast Asia stems not from any belief in an intrinsically different approach, but rather a reaction to the sermonising of the West.

To those who believe the world is shrinking, the danger lies in these differing views of human development becoming locked in conflict at a time when global trends suggest that peace and the welfare of all are tied even closer than ever before to transnational cooperation and understanding. If, on the other hand, the world is on the verge of a new culturally-driven fragmentation as some have suggested, the challenge to Western thinking should be taken more seriously.

Ideological concerns about human rights and democracy in the West more recently spring from the conviction that free market capitalism and electoral democracy are inseparable, if not indistinguishable. The assumption, of course, is flawed if viewed from the perspective of Western—European and North American—history. The germination of free-market capitalism occurred against a backdrop of the flagrant abuse of human rights—slavery, indentured labour, colonialism and so on. As Andre Gunnar Frank points out: ‘Countries in the West have been able to afford the precious luxury of electoral political democracy only where and when the basis of their economy afforded it to them.’ The ideological clutter of the Cold War blinded many Westerners to the flawed logic of their argument: it was simply imperative to prove that capitalism was good and socialism was bad. Capitalism thrived in a democracy, it shrivelled under centrally-planned
economies. Hence, the issue of human and political freedom became closely identified with economic success.

Of course, to many ordinary Southeast Asians the notion that the freedom to vote enhanced their economic status and security was outlandish. To them, capitalism, as experienced in the colonial period and early years of independence, bred inequality not democracy. After the departure of rent-seeking colonial entrepreneurs, along came corrupt officials and politicians. Initially they looked for popular support, but once in power they preferred to rely on the patronage of rich business cronies to buy them support. In popular terms, therefore, capitalism became associated with corruption and exploitation. Hence the appeal of socialist and communist movements in the region during the first few years of independence. Replacing socialism as the idiom of protest, as we shall see later on, is not so much an appeal to democratic principles, but more traditional forms of moral and religious expression which help people deal with the injustice of social and economic inequality.

Democracy, as practised in contemporary Southeast Asia, is often perceived as a form of government dominated and manipulated by the rich and powerful. In countries like Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines, where regular elections have assumed more importance in the political process, the chief concern of non-governmental electoral watch-dogs is rampant vote buying. In the July 1995 elections held in Thailand, the Thai Farmers Bank estimated that almost US$ 8 million were spent by political parties. Votes were sold for as much as US$ 60 apiece in urban areas. In state elections held in the Malaysian state of Sabah in February 1994, a regional diplomat observing the polls was told by embarrassed Malaysian election officials that there was little they could do to stop the contesting parties using large sums of money to buy over voters.19

People also tend to be aware that Western business interests traditionally support the rich and powerful; not the poor or politically dispossessed in their countries. The association of democracy with free market capitalism does not immediately spring to the minds of the generation of nationalists who battled the colonial powers. Early forms of capitalism rained hardship on the people; it stood for exploitation. Many of these movements flirted with or embraced socialism, because socialism was the liberation ideology of the prewar era. Some of the socialist
ideology has been hard to shake off, even in the era of foreign investment. Alongside Indonesia’s liberal investment laws, the constitution enshrines cooperatives and the notion of production for the collective good. Even Singapore’s seemingly freewheeling entrepôt society is governed by strict notions of forced savings and welfare.

Perhaps it would be more accurate to consider that democracy, seen through the eyes of the pioneer nationalist generation, was more closely identified with the struggle for freedom and not with how to govern. No one paid much heed to the detailed working of a democratic society while they fought to shrug off the imperial yoke. Sukarno’s famous declaration of independence on 17 August 1945, went no further than declaring the country free; the details, he said, reading from a small sheet of paper, would be worked out later. Democracy was therefore understood more as a slogan than a working principle. Moreover, the perception of a functioning democracy, with institutionalised checks and balances on executive power, remains complicated by the survival of an indigenous dichotomy with regard to leadership. Virtuous leadership can be strong and blindly obeyed; amoral, tyrannical rulers can and should be opposed. Democracy is still widely treated as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself.

This gulf in perceptions of what democracy means to societies in Southeast Asia has been exploited by a variety of interests and agendas on both sides of the cultural divide, sometimes with less probity than meets the eye. In the West, human rights lobby groups are sometimes hostage to a much broader policy agenda that satisfies Western urges to retain global leadership. In Southeast Asia, the loudest drum-beating about Asian values comes from conservative politicians anxious to perpetuate nationalist virtues and the life of their regimes. Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad’s shrill rhetoric about the bullying ways of the West seems to stem as much from a desire to inspire faith in his leadership and a common identity among ethnically diverse Malaysians, as it does from a rational conception of Western intentions.

Even if conflicting interests have helped to generate contrasting definitions which at times obscure the basic issues of individual human freedom and dignity, the conflict of definitions has assumed political dimensions which are affecting relations between the West and Southeast Asia. When the British press made allegations
that the Malaysian government accepted bribes from British companies in return for awarding them government contracts, the ever-prickly Mahathir accused the British media of having a ‘colonial brain’ and slapped an embargo on awarding further contracts to British companies. Although it was tempting to regard Malaysia’s response to this perceived affront as an isolated fit of pique, it might be noted that in the same month (March 1994) Thailand told the US to be mindful of accusing the Thai army of lending support to the Khmer Rouge, and Singapore was telling foreigners that it had the right to flog Western teenagers who behaved like hooligans. In all three cases, it was made clear that these were no longer countries which could be pushed around. In an editorial a year later, the Bangkok Post stridently opined:

> as the gap between the standard of living in Thailand and that of the West narrows, so the amount of respect rendered diminishes. It is all too common for some long-staying foreigners to lament the want of courtesy in present-day Thai society. They look back to a golden age of greater, and therefore more picturesque, poverty.... Some foreigners are not really able to concede that the impressive advances made in recent years, and those which are to come, are the result of the efforts and ingenuity of ourselves as Asians.20

In the war of words which followed the Malaysian embargo on British companies, much of the argument was about whether distinctive Asian values offered valid separate definitions of press freedom, business ethics and face. Valid or not, the aggressive posturing of some Asian politicians, and rather defensive response on the part of the West, has elevated the Asian values debate to a political plane. Politics, therefore, and not the objective consideration of universal ethics, is helping to bifurcate the definition of human values.

The key to understanding this low-intensity ideological divide between Asia and the West is to recognise how the region is developing both economically and politically. The seven countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations—the non-communist states of Southeast Asia during the Cold War—constitute a region of some 420 million people, with a combined GDP (excluding Vietnam) of some US$ 293 billion, working out per capita at US$ 888 and growing at an aggregate rate of 7 per
cent per year. This is a part of the world only slightly less populous than North America or Europe growing at roughly double their rates. A relatively long period of peace and stability in most cases has also generated a sense of confidence and belief that political maturity has been attained. This means that countries which once hung on every word uttered by their former colonial lords and later paternalistic donors, now feel they can and should make their own choices. At the same time, Western perceptions of the region are also changing.

Southeast Asia was, like Europe, cleaved in two by the Cold War. Vietnam led its political ciphers Laos and later Cambodia down the communist road on one side of this so-called ‘bamboo curtain’. The communist tide was halted in Indonesia in the mid-1960s, which together with Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines, formed the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). For over two decades ASEAN offered a beachhead from which the West launched its assault on communism in Asia. Political order and strong economic performance were perhaps more effective as weapons against Communism than the millions of tons of bombs dropped by American bombers on Vietnam and Cambodia.

Unlike Europe, though, not all the non-communist states of Southeast Asia matched their anti-communist fervour with support for Western-style democracy and human rights. Free enterprise and the market were their preferred adopted Western values. Individual rights and political pluralism were deemed destabilising, the more so with ‘reds’ under the bed. Yet while the non-communist ASEAN countries manned the battlements in the fight against Communism, the West was willing to turn a blind eye to the abuse of human rights—and even defended authoritarian right-wing regimes as the best defence against Communism. Even before the communist tide was turned, however, awkward questions were raised with regard to this uneasy paradox. The dramatic popular overthrow of President Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines in 1986 heralded a new approach to Western foreign policy in the region; one less willing to tolerate non-communist autocrats. The trend was confirmed when, just two years later, US officials began working a human rights agenda into relations with the Suharto government in Indonesia.

By 1990, human rights and democracy had become a prominent theme at ASEAN ‘post-ministerial meetings’ that involve ASEAN’s
dialogue partners from the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the European Union. The post-ministerial meeting began life as a trade forum; now it became the scene of friction between the two sides over political issues. There were hints that sanctions may be used. The US and European Union (EU) wanted ASEAN to exert pressure on the harsh military regime in Burma after it failed to implement the results of the 1990 general election. The EU wanted to insert a human rights clause in a new bilateral cooperation agreement with ASEAN—making progress on human rights a condition of normal trading relations. Indonesia came under fire for its handling of irredentism in East Timor and Aceh. Some Western governments cut off aid to Indonesia after the 12 November 1991 shooting of demonstrators in East Timor. The US cut off aid to Thailand after a military coup against the democratically elected government of Chatichai Choonhavan in February 1991.

To many ASEAN officials, fresh from labouring to bring about a peace settlement in Cambodia, Western hand-wringing about human rights and democracy seemed unreasonable and inappropriate. ASEAN diplomats employed international law and human rights arguments to condemn Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia at the United Nations. In the 1990s, Muslim communities in Southeast Asia watched the West pulverise Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War, then stand idly by while Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Croats bled Bosnia’s Muslims. Mahathir Mohamad went to the United Nations in 1991 and accused the West of ‘preaching’ and double standards. Singapore’s former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew scoffed at Americans as ‘great missionaries. They have an irrepressible urge to convert others.’

Angered by the threat of using trade and aid as a lever against them, a collective ASEAN diplomatic counter-offensive got under way in the early 1990s. Some ASEAN governments attacked the West for trying to impose alien values on their tried and stable systems. These, it was said, were deeply rooted in Asian tradition and culture. A culture which, they said, values collective rights more highly than the rights of the individual. ‘Asia has never valued the individual over society’, Lee Kuan Yew told *Time* magazine in June 1993. ‘The society has always been more important than the individual. I think that is what saved Asia from greater misery.’  

Fragile ethnic equations were put at risk, it was argued, when unbridled freedom was granted to the populace.
‘Those of us who have experienced racial riots, as Singapore and Malaysia have, know what effect an inflammatory speech can have’, wrote Kishore Mahbubani, a senior Singaporean diplomat. Above all, Southeast Asian diplomats and politicians said, the region’s prosperity was threatened if individual rights were fashioned into a goal more important than development and prosperity for all.

The Bangkok Declaration of April 1993, issued ahead of the United Nations Human Rights Conference in June that year, distilled Asian definitions of human rights in a way which to Western observers eroded their universality. The declaration spoke of the ‘imposition of incompatible values’, and ‘regional particularities’. It diluted the primacy of civil and political rights by insisting that the right to development, social, cultural and economic rights were equally important and interdependent. Many of the region’s non-governmental organisations distanced themselves from the declaration on these grounds too. The declaration marked the first attempt to define a set of human values for the region. However, the parameters were set by those in power.

The West was accused of ignoring other rights. A primary human right, it was argued, was the right of survival—the same argument used, incidentally, to counter Western criticism of how Southeast Asian countries exploit their tropical forest resources. ‘Developing nations must first secure the economic rights of their people before concentrating on individual rights’, said Indonesia’s foreign minister Ali Alatas. President Suharto of Indonesia spoke of creating a fair and prosperous society, ‘not only for one person, but for the whole of society’. The attitude most governments in the region adopted ahead of the UN human rights conference in Vienna that year was that development should take priority over human rights, and that so-called economic, cultural and social rights are more important than civil and political rights.

The region’s pro-active stance on human rights, its active search for an alternative formula rather than a defensive shrug of the shoulders, was a marked departure from earlier diplomatic practice. Apart from anything else, the approach to human rights in the run up to the Vienna conference pulled these countries closer together and made them think harder about what they shared in common. The problem lay in the weakness of the consensus; not all countries were so dogmatic. Reminded of its
recent political experience and a century of American influence, the Philippines stoutly defended Western values of human rights and democracy—even to the extent of emphasising contrasts with the rest of the ASEAN grouping. ‘East Asian critics are right about one thing’, said the prominent Filipino businessman Jaime Zobel de Ayala:

Democracy is expensive—but it is not a luxury. It is a necessity for us. But neither has it been a total failure. Among the countries of Asia, we at least have solved the deadly problem of political succession in developing countries without tanks on the streets.22

The new generation of civilian politicians in Thailand who owed little or nothing to military patronage, preened their newly-acquired democratic plumage. All the same, with an eye on the interests of regional harmony and a powerful bureaucracy that jealously guards its power, they argued against strident Western advocacy. ‘Human rights must emerge primarily from within, and not be imposed from without’, insisted Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai in March 1993. Putting this more bluntly, Surin Pitsuwan, a senior minister in Chuan’s cabinet, said:

I tell the Americans: Look, we’re developing like you. We’re almost a mirror image of you. But you have to understand, that we also have the right to be different from you.23

Countering the particularistic stance adopted by core ASEAN countries like Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, Western human rights groups scoffed at the suggestion that there was an Asian approach to human rights and democracy. As one Western human rights activist put it: ‘There is nothing special about torturing the Asian way. Rape is not something that is done an Asian way. Rape is rape, torture is torture, and human rights are human rights.’ Some commentators took exception to the view that strong government made a positive contribution to economic growth, and insisted that ‘on the contrary the economic rise of Asia was made possible by precisely the Western liberalism which the Asian model affects to condemn’.24 The Western academic world lent scholarly weight to this view with the contention that democracy marches just a step behind economic progress. No new-fangled theory this—
merely a reworking of classic Weberian thought. Consciously or otherwise, the idea of the universality of industrial society was applied to the region. The empiricists identified Asia’s emerging middle classes as the standard bearers of democracy, and pointed to popular expressions of middle-class sentiment in Manila, Beijing, Seoul, Taipei and Bangkok to support their views.

This clash of views is on the verge of distilling a new ideological divide within the boundaries of what, during the Cold War, was considered the ‘free world’—something that should worry Western policy-makers as much as it worries liberals in the region. If the US and other Western countries continue to press for progress towards their definition of democracy and human rights, some Asian governments are just as likely to resist and in the process fashion their own definition of these values. A hardening of stands or acknowledgment of differences over issues as fundamental as human rights and democracy would not serve Western interests. In Southeast Asia it would create opportunities for political polarisation similar to that between Left and Right in the 1960s and 1970s. There would be no winners; only losers.

The logic may be flawed, but the impasse is real enough. As pressure from the West on governments in the region to improve their human rights record and promote democracy built up in the early 1990s, however more democratic some of these countries appeared to be, conservative ruling elites worked hard to reinforce traditional models of society and political culture. There were dissonant voices on both sides of the divide, of course. In a deliberately leaked memo about US policy in Asia, Winston Lord, the state department’s senior Asian hand complained in May 1994 that the overzealous pursuit of human rights, trade and other concerns was backfiring and driving Asian nations into a united front against the US.25 In the same month, Malaysia’s Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim told the author that ‘there was too much talk about the excesses of the West and not enough about the excesses of the East’.

Before considering the possibility of a middle ground, it may be worth examining more closely why governments which for the most part have been staunchly pro-Western for the past quarter of a century have opted to argue with their former allies over political philosophy.
Brash new states in a shrinking world

A primary argument used in the West to promote its human rights and democracy agenda is that the world is shrinking. The shrinking global community and advance of transnationalism brought about by the new information era makes political congruity an inevitability. Gone are the ideological barriers to international discourse and cooperation. Trade is flowing faster over greater distances. Communications technology is shrinking distances. ‘Communications and economic activity that leap national borders are homogenising the cultural diversity that heretofore has been one of the main contributions of the nation state system’, observed Seyom Brown.27

In the Asia Pacific region, this argument has been used by Professor Robert Scalapino to predict that ‘nationalism is being undermined by current events’. Yet Scalapino shrewdly recognises the limits of internationalism in Asia. Here after all, Marxist-Leninist regimes survive (in North Korea, Vietnam, and China) and authoritarian systems thrive. Thus, he talks of a ‘curious medley of greater global uniformity and diversity’.28 Nevertheless, encroaching global uniformity is widely considered to herald the triumph of the democratic ideal. While the end of the Cold War has proven this assumption of doubtful validity in a Europe formerly cleaved by immutable ideologies, but now plagued by tribal rivalry, it is arguably even less applicable in Southeast Asia where ‘democratic’ has its own connotations.

If the relevance of the nation state is diminishing, the problem for Southeast Asian states is that their internal political systems still draw strength from the relatively recent nationalist struggles of the post-colonial era. Most Southeast Asian states only obtained their independence in the late 1940s—Malaysia (then Malaya) as late as 1957, Singapore in 1965, and Brunei only in 1984. Vietnam, it should be remembered, ended three decades of armed struggle as a unified nation state in 1975. As modern nation states, the ten states of Southeast Asia are relatively new and can therefore be acutely sensitive to criticism, often casting outside scrutiny in the role of a threat to sovereignty. Here is how prominent Indonesian newspaper editor Jakob Oetama summed up the position:

These countries...are very sensitive towards anything which they perceive as undermining their national sovereignty....
This sensitivity is further strengthened by the fact that in relations between an industrialised country and a developing country, the latter is in a weaker position—in terms of trade, science technology, and now also because of the debt burden.29

Few Asian countries experienced the intensity of nationalist sentiment which developed in Indonesia and Vietnam during their struggle for independence. Both countries became independent after bloody revolutions. The Indonesian ruling elite is still dominated by members of that revolutionary generation—Indonesia celebrated half a century of independence in 1995. The transfer of power to a post-revolutionary generation won’t be complete until President Suharto leaves the scene—he was elected for a sixth five year term in March 1993 and increasingly has looked as if he would seek another term. While there are hints of diluting the cult built around Ho Chi Minh (who died in 1969) in Vietnam, the ruling elite still draws legitimacy from the nationalist struggle. The fact that Vietnam clings to socialism may have more to do with the legitimacy its leadership draws from over 30 years of nationalist struggle than any commitment to ideology. Their fear is that by suddenly changing the system, their positions—and not just the primacy of Marxism—will be threatened.

Malaysia and Singapore experienced an essentially peaceful transition to independence—Singapore’s involving a subsequent ejection from the Malaysian Federation in 1965. For both countries, the earliest years of independence were marked by a threat to their sovereignty from neighbouring states. Sukarno concocted the view that Malaysia (before Singapore left the Malaysian Federation) was a creation of the colonial powers to destabilise Indonesia. Sukarno’s ill-fated military response to that perceived threat bred a strategic insecurity in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore which survives to this day. But oddly enough, the very fact that the transition to independence on the Malay peninsula was peaceful also left its mark. Not experiencing the passion of revolution has left Malaysians and Singaporeans quick to take offence, and they are the most prickly when it comes to outside interference. The modern Malay peninsula harbours another paradox, because for all the apparent entrenched Western influence suggested by the widespread use of English and the maintenance of British-style legal and governmental institutions it is the source of some of the most strident anti-Western rhetoric.
Whether or not any irony was intended, the *Straits Times* of Singapore described Malaysia as ‘possibly the most traditionally-minded country in Southeast Asia’.30

Malaysia’s strident defence of indigenous tradition is perhaps a reflex born of the need to establish a binding sense of national identity in a fragile multiethnic context, without common indigenous roots. Muslim Malays account for barely half the population of almost 20 million people; Chinese and a small proportion of Indians make up the rest. As part of this effort to instil a national identity, Malaysia’s Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad spent his first years in power after 1981 buying ‘British last’ and ‘looking East’. Faintly echoing Sukarno’s tilt away from the developed world at the Bandung Asia-Africa conference in 1955, Mahathir’s view of Malaysia was firmly rooted in the Afro-Asian world. More recently, he has led a revival of developing world rhetoric in the ‘Group of 15’ forum, convened in 1990, which is designed to enhance ‘South-South’ cooperation. In 1991 he campaigned for an ‘East Asian Economic Grouping’, later modified to a caucus, to combat the perceived rise of protectionism in the West. When the United States objected to such a caucus, a move which apparently made Japan and Korea reluctant to endorse the idea, a frustrated Mahathir wondered aloud if this was because ‘our faces are brown’.

It would be naïve to consider that Mahathir expends so much energy on blasting the West only because of his personal feelings. ‘He says what he thinks people want to hear; what he does is something else’, commented a close political colleague. ‘Mahathir was not and is not a xenophobe’, asserts his recent biographer, Khoo Boo Teik. His anti-Western rhetoric, Khoo reasons, represents an attempt to ‘depart from…the Malay nationalist’s traditional, self-consuming preoccupation with the Malay position vis-à-vis the non-Malay communities’.31 The need to appeal to conservative Islamic anti-materialism—which associates Western ways with all that is un-Islamic—could explain why Mahathir often attacks the West for its loose moral values, as well as for political double standards. At other times, the official rhetoric seems to be driven by a quest for unity, zeroing in on outside criticism as an assault by forces resentful of the nation’s achievements, bent on undermining the country’s progress. To some this betrays a sense of insecurity; to others a degree of arrogance
born of unquestioned political domination by a small national elite.

Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew stepped down as prime minister in November 1990. Since then, he has frequently criticised the West for trying to impose alien values on Asian society. In June 1995, he blasted the United States for attempting to impose what he called ‘cultural domination’ on Asia. He amazed many by going to Manila in 1992 and arguing that the liberal democracy practised in the Philippines was an obstacle to economic progress which required collective discipline and firm central control. Both Lee and Mahathir have been outspoken about the dangers of assuming that all societies share the same conception of democracy. More recently, they have attenuated the argument to imply that democracy as such is no guarantee of a stable society—pointing to events in the fragmented former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Such views are generally accompanied by justifications of why press freedom and individual rights are more controlled in the region. Neither leader makes any apology for the kind of political system they lead.

The intellectual source of this kind of rhetoric can be traced to the shared backgrounds and political environments from which both these senior regional leaders came. Both men grew up and came of age in the colonial context. The British colonial milieu was more benign and therefore tolerated, or ignored, the incubation of nationalist ideas up to a point. Rhetorical skills took root in the school debating societies encouraged by liberal British teachers. Both men articulated strong anti-colonial views in the course of their political apprenticeship. Later, as leaders they presided over complex plural societies where very often the best defence against internal strife was the fashioning of external threats. However, basic conspiracy theory does not fully explain the stridency of their rhetoric.

To some degree this must betray a shared conviction, if not a measure of grudge, against the West. In Mahathir’s case, this may stem from the fact that he did not have an overseas Western education like others of his generation. Mahathir took his medical degree from a colonial university in Singapore. Privately, close associates say he was deeply scarred by the fact that those with a British education initially secured positions in the new Malaysian elite, while he had to work his way up from a humble doctor’s practice in a north-eastern provincial town and spent some years in
the political wilderness. Publicly Mahathir denies he is anti-Western— in fact he sent two of his children to British public schools. Khoo Boo Teik casts Mahathir’s stance as a paradox: ‘He would look East to catch up with the West.’ Privately, though, he urges Malaysians to strive harder so that one day they can look down on the ‘white man’ the way the white men once looked down on them.

Lee Kuan Yew’s prejudices are harder to fathom because he enjoyed all the privileges of a British education denied to Mahathir. He took a law degree from Cambridge and later qualified as a barrister in London. This equipped him with a convincing intellectual grasp of both Eastern and Western culture. Talking about Democracy at a conference in Tokyo in 1991, for example, Lee drew parallels between Russia and Asia:

> European historians ascribe Russia’s lack of a liberal civic society to the fact that she missed the Renaissance and also the Enlightenment. These were the two leavening experiences that lifted Western Europe to a more humane culture. Now, if democracy will not work for the Russians, a white Christian people, can we assume it will naturally work for Asians?  

Although it is quite likely that an Asian in postwar England may have encountered some racial prejudice, Lee hardly comes across as an anglophobe. He recently praised the British for not trying to impose their culture on Singapore, as he sees the United States doing today. Both Lee and Mahathir appear to privately enjoy the company of Westerners and appreciate Western culture, almost to the point of craving. Mahathir spends most long holidays in Europe and particularly enjoys the British theatre. Lee enjoys close relationships with a range of Western statesmen, and clearly likes pounding the conference circuit with them. Yet publicly both men reject Western values, harnessing their rhetoric to the search for new expressions of nationalistic fervour. They appear to revel in the notoriety this has won them at no cost to their economic well-being. ‘We get investment from the private sector, while thumbing our noses at their governments—and I think they enjoy it’, Mahathir once said.

Do either of these two men, who have made deep impacts on the political cultures of their own countries, reflect the views of their countrymen? Perhaps only to the extent that they represent a
generation of frustrated nationalists who have yet to pass from the scene. The British colonial system allowed the nurturing of native intellectual skills at the expense of self-esteem. Quite simply, brown or yellow faces were not accepted. The Dutch in Indonesia, the French in Indochina and the Spanish in the Philippines were also racist and treated their colonial subjects less fairly, but they also intermarried with them and cultivated a mestizo race. The Dutch, for example, accepted their ‘Indo’ offspring into the European circle, even though public places frequented by Europeans were barred to ‘dogs and inlanders’ (natives). In French colonies, there was greater acceptance of natives or mestizos who opted to embrace the metropolitan culture.

Thus Ho Chi Minh could join the French Communist Party in Paris and become a member of the Party’s central committee. Lee Kuan Yew could only have a successful law firm in Singapore, and be patronised later as a leader who might have achieved greater international stature if he had run a bigger country. The British, as George Orwell illustrates in *Burmese Days*, had the club and a set of strict rules barring natives from the long bars they frequented from Rangoon to Singapore. Is it so surprising that when the ‘natives’ came to power, they felt the urge every so often to debunk their former masters?

The younger generation of Singaporeans and Malaysians thinks differently, but not all that differently. Theirs is a pride born of achievement rather than prejudice. Rather than aspiring to beat the West and somehow make up for the inequities of the colonial past, they yearn for equality. They talk of ‘a new history of East-West relations’, of ‘a new spirit of partnership and shared destiny between East and West’. They are liable to question the actions of their own ruling elites as much as the actions of a Western government. A Malaysian journalist pointedly asked a senior official why the government was criticising the Western powers in Bosnia, and saying nothing about the abuse of human rights in Burma and East Timor. The sentiment of the younger generation was echoed eloquently by Anwar Ibrahim:

> Although we reject the condescending attitude of outsiders in respect of our efforts to deal with these issues, we also deplore at the same time the arrogant elites within our societies, who either condone or seek to perpetuate excesses.
Yet the younger generation’s perceptions are finely balanced, and easily swayed by nationalist arguments, for they have been reared on a diet of nationalism born of the colonial struggle. No society entirely discards its past. Indeed, the rapid pace of change in these societies may be helping to preserve rather than erase traditional identities. ‘We are all in the midst of very rapid change and at the same time we are all groping towards a destination which we hope will be identifiable with our past’, notes Lee Kuan Yew. To this end, however more liberal the next generation of leaders in Singapore and Malaysia may seem by comparison, they may be tempted to harness nationalism to new definitions of distinctiveness such as religion or culture.

Indonesia faces a nationalist dilemma of another kind when it comes to principles of human rights and democracy. The principal focus of Western criticism has been a small former Portuguese colony of East Timor, which Indonesia unilaterally annexed in 1975. In the following two years, the United Nations General Assembly passed no less than eight resolutions calling for Indonesia to withdraw, affirming the right of the territory’s 600,000 people to self-determination and independence. East Timor remains on the UN’s decolonisation list, classified as a ‘non-self-governing territory’. In March 1993, following two years of renewed trouble in the territory and evidence of an upsurge in separatist activity, the United Nations Human Rights Commission accepted a resolution expressing ‘deep concern’ at human rights violations in East Timor. Observers saw the move stemming from a hardening of the new US administration’s approach to human rights which lent support to the EU’s campaign.

For Western observers, the possibility that as many as 100,000 Timorese perished in the process of annexation by Indonesia, has made the issue one of the shining examples of human rights abuse in the region. Yet even the most liberal Indonesians do not question their government’s sovereignty over East Timor— even if they do recoil from the methods used to maintain law and order. ‘The Indonesian elite sees East Timor as a case of rebellion rather than of rights; even the Indonesian human rights community is not actively concerned’, writes American academic John Bresnan. When a university in the Philippines convened a conference on East Timor at the end of May 1994, the Indonesian government put pressure on the government in Manila to stop it. But nationalist hackles were also raised in Indonesia. Only the
staunchest Indonesian critics of the government’s human rights record felt moved to defend the conference. Indonesia’s armed forces take the view that if the government yields to one ethnic or regional group with irredentist claims, then others might raise latent claims, thus threatening the fabric of the unitary state. This reasoning explains why local insurrection is dealt with harshly, with the deliberate motive of setting an example. Clearly their strategy for maintaining order in a unitary state as large and diverse as Indonesia makes few concessions to Western notions of human rights and democracy. For the time being, though, suggestions that Indonesia should define their state by any other means grate with the strong sense of nationalism.

On a broader level, the region’s economic confidence also helps explain the rejection of the new Western policy agenda. Despite official harping on ‘development’ and ‘dependency’, the region is in fact less dependent than ever before. Having enjoyed growth rates averaging over 8 per cent for the past 5 years or more, most of the region’s governments have begun to feel they can afford to shrug off Western pressure. Singapore’s minister of arts and information, Brigadier General George Yeo summed up this view when he spoke of the emergence of a Southeast Asian consciousness, a distinct character and identity which is evolving despite the non-homogeneous nature of its population, and the varied sources of its culture.40 Looking to the future, Yeo hoped that ‘Eastern societies’ would come into their own and change the present intellectual thinking that Western values should domi nate the world.

Old patron-client relations between the West and the new nations of Asia are transforming into economic ties on a more equal footing. Trade between Western countries and Southeast Asia is growing apace—forcing the West on the economic defensive. Asian markets are robust and lucrative and many Western multinationals can no longer afford to lose their footing in them. What is more, some Southeast Asians see themselves as incipient patrons in their own right: Indonesia is chairman of the Non-aligned movement; Malaysia is championing third world causes; and Thailand is fashioning a policy to help put Indochina’s economy back on its feet. Ironically, there was even talk in Bangkok of using the events of May 1992—when pro-democracy forces overcame military might to help install a civilian government — to persuade Burma to adopt a more democratic course. While
the West questioned the democratic credentials of ASEAN countries some of those ASEAN countries helped Cambodians learn how to conduct democratic elections, and have since sent peace-keeping troops to the Balkans and Somalia.

This growing sense of economic and political confidence helps explain the negative response to the West’s new policy thrust. Here is a part of the world that feels it is now ready to match its economic muscle with a global and regional diplomatic role, and is in no mood to be preached to. As Samuel Huntingdon puts it: ‘A West at the peak of its power confronts a non-West that increasingly has the desire, the will, and the resources to shape the world in a non-Western way.’ In one sense, therefore, the negative reaction from Southeast Asia to the West’s clamouring about human rights and democracy might be driven more by Western preaching rather than a rejection of the principles of human rights and democracy themselves. If this was solely the case, the burden of resolving this impasse falls squarely on Western shoulders. However, there are also those in Southeast Asia who argue that not all societies are the same.
Chapter 4
Core values or elitist cores

Western arrogance is breeding many Lee Kuan Yews in Southeast Asia,
A senior Indonesian diplomat (personal communication to the author)

One day in October 1993, a group of foreign teenagers attending an international school in Singapore took an aerosol can of paint and casually sprayed the sides of a few parked cars. They smeared some eggs on them, and later engaged in a little adolescent street vandalism. Little did they know then, that being caught involved a maximum penalty of flogging, or that one of the boys, called Michael Fay, would become a test case for the defence of ‘Asian values’.

The caning sentence passed on the miscreant Michael Fay in early 1994 attracted astonishing international media interest. For as well as being a teenager, Fay was also an American citizen. Prescribing corporal punishment for petty vandalism of this kind in Singapore actually stems from official sensitivity to politically-induced graffiti—not to the idle boredom of adolescence. The United States government took the view that the punishment was too harsh and eventually even the White House appealed for clemency. Singapore seized on this as proof that the West was trying to impose its own values on Asia. Ironically, while the New York Times railed against Singapore’s ‘primitive’ laws, opinion polls taken in crime-racked American cities showed a measure of support for meting out corporal punishment to convicted vandals.

In the region, opinion was deeply divided. In neighbouring Malaysia and Indonesia, there was little sympathy for Fay, but neither are Singapore’s stringent laws viewed with much
ardour. Some observers felt that Singapore, already an expensive place to do business, was in danger of driving out the expatriate business community. A European diplomat stationed in Southeast Asia, who lost a son to a drive-by shooting in New York city, thought that caning was too good for people like Fay.

In the end, Fay’s sentence was reduced from six to four strokes of the Rotan cane—allegedly in mitigation for his admission of guilt. Michael Fay, his crime and his punishment, may not be the most glamorous of historical benchmarks, but the case marks a point where a Southeast Asian government stoutly defended a set of values it claimed was distinct from those of the West. Francis Fukuyama went so far as to call it ‘a challenge being put forth by Asian society to the United States and other Western democracies’.  

Western observers have always been struck by the distinctiveness and sophistication of Asian cultures but, with very few exceptions, could not conceive these cultures being supported by a value system of equal merit with that of their own. Although Southeast Asians could hardly be considered primitive when Europeans first gazed at the awesome temples of Angkor Ayudhya or Borobodur, their builders’ ignorance of Christianity consigned them to the moral fringe. ‘They eat neither milk, cheese, nor butter; and there is nobody who knows how to make it’, wrote Portuguese traveller Antonio Galvao of the Moluccan natives on his arrival in Indonesia’s eastern islands mid-sixteenth century:

They do not differ much from each other in bodily make-up facial features, or customs because all of them are addicted to vices, robberies, wars and sorceries.

The overt or mechanical means of asserting this sense of moral superiority may have disappeared with the collapse of colonialism, but traces of it still linger and can be found lurking like a computer virus in much of the ideological debate over political systems in modern Southeast Asia. As one regional newspaper editorial writer put it, ‘In the West they have prosperity: We must be content with material consumerism.’

Karl Marx found Asian society unfathomable and difficult to cleave with his revolutionary predictions for the future of mankind. Marx was searching for a universal theory of history based on a unilinear concept of progress. In Asia he found it difficult to apply
his thinking because the divisions in society he predicted as a result of progress were not occurring. He therefore dismissed the more populous half of the world with the vaguely explained ‘Asiatic mode of production’. Ironically, not long after Marx’s proletarian revolution finally floundered in the early 1990s, the idea of an ‘Asiatic mode’ was resurrected in Southeast Asia. ‘Asian values’ or the ‘Asian way’ are the new political buzzwords used by those politicians determined to assert a difference between their political cultures and those of the West. Sometimes the idea is taken seriously; but mostly it is dismissed as a defensive manoeuvre deployed by ruling elites to preserve their power. In the words of one Western diplomat serving in the region and speaking to the author in Bangkok in 1995, ‘Perhaps they saw a Human Rights policy coming, and thought that offense was the best form of defense.’

To counter the assumption that Asian society is moving inexorably towards parity with Western values, ruling elites in Southeast Asia have begun to erect fences around what they regard as the core values of their own societies, claiming these as the basis of the region’s social harmony and economic success. Collective social norms, respect for authority and suppression of individual interest before that of the community or state, are some of the common denominators claimed by the region’s elites—Society as No. 1. As we have seen, the rhetoric has been dressed up in terms of a defence of sovereignty and a claim to be masters of their own destiny now that a measure of economic self-sufficiency has been achieved.

Nonsense, say the guardians of the liberal faith. Western commentators, politicians as well as local non-governmental pressure groups argue that differences in norms and value systems, particularly in areas governing the relationship between state and society, are fast being eroded in the new borderless world. In their view, it surely cannot be long before people in the region wake up, abandon anachronistic notions of collective discipline and control, and join the real world. Even those liberals who see merit in the discipline, strong family values and conscientious work-ethic of Asian societies (inasmuch as these diminish the need for costly welfare programmes) assume that the collective tendencies these breed will eventually be tempered by the spirit of individual enterprise.
Truly this is dangerous ground. For if we accept at face value that the relationship between the state and the individual in Southeast Asia is wholly conditioned by culture, then the need for conservative governments and ruling elites to be accountable flies out of the window. On the other hand, is it right to imagine that political templates forged elsewhere in the world can simply fall into place without adjusting their design? The question is where can the line be drawn in Southeast Asia?

In this chapter it will be argued, with respect to political culture, that the image of a tidal wave of Western-style liberalism washing over sandbags of traditional values is too simplistic. Equally though, it would be wrong to assume that the region can resist changes to prevailing political systems entirely. The fact that governments have been made to think about universal standards of human rights, to set up human rights commissions, and therefore admit that their citizens have individual rights to defend, is in itself a significant shift in attitude—although not a seismically significant one in some cases.

In Indonesia, the National Human Rights Commission, confounding initial scepticism, has in fact shown its independence and promoted the protection of human rights. The trial of soldiers involved in the November 1991 cemetery massacre in East Timor, and the reopening of a case involving the alleged shooting of a labour activist in East Java, were the results of the Commission’s investigations. None the less, the Commission’s vice-chairman Marzuki Darusman considers ‘to be practical in Indonesia, protection and respect of human rights will only be possible if there is cooperation with the Armed Forces of Indonesia’. 4

Some would argue that this crab-like movement towards parity with liberal norms is the price Southeast Asian societies must pay for social harmony and stability. A younger generation politician with a Western education like Thailand’s Surin Pitsuwan agrees:

It’s all a matter of time—a gradual process of change. But the final, mature form of political development won’t necessarily exactly replicate Western democracy, but it will approximate democracy none the less. 5

As we saw earlier with respect to political development in the immediate post-colonial period, a gradual adaptation of imported political institutions to indigenous political culture is underway.
Indonesian intellectual Dewi Anwar likens the process to the spread of Islam in the sixteenth century:

The spread of democracy in Southeast Asia will probably follow the pattern of the spread of Islam. It will be evolutionary and it will adapt to local circumstances.... Just as in the case of Islam, the idea of an empowered civil society will initially emerge as a counter-culture, but gradually the ruling elite will become converted, if merely for the sake of maintaining legitimacy.6

Realistically speaking, it is a process that is modulating imported values as fast as it is recasting local traditions in distinctive ways. We have seen how the region’s governments have reacted to Western preaching on human rights and democracy; now let us hazard a guess at how this will affect the shape of political culture in the region.

First though, a reality check. The more developed countries in the Southeast Asia of the mid-1990s matched enviable political stability with rapid economic growth. Ruling elites in these states argued against rocking the boat from a position of strength. Calling a general election in April 1995, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said that ‘continuity of development’ would be the principal theme of the campaign. ‘If you start changing horses in mid-stream, you’re likely to drown.’ It was a persuasive argument, not merely because of the risk that alternative leaders would tinker with successful policies, but because subliminally the message was that siding with opposition could affect the chances of obtaining funds or contracts.

Although pressure for political change was obvious everywhere, in none of these states was there evidence of an imminent withering of state power or overthrow of the ruling establishment. A kind of dynamic equilibrium existed, in which the forces for change, fuelled by demands for economic justice and political freedom emanating from some sections of society, were balanced by extensive support for the status quo in others. Although such support could be guaranteed by a strong measure of state control, undeniably the material benefits of prosperity also dampened popular enthusiasm for political change. If not, then the spectre of economic decline was brandished by the state in the face of
dissenters. Let’s call these states—Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore—the stable states.

For less economically developed states like Burma, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, the prospects of maintaining the political status quo looked less certain. A Vietnamese economist in mid-1994 predicted that his country’s medium-term political future would definitely involve changes to the prevailing political system; his only uncertainty was whether the change would be peaceful or involve a violent upheaval. With the free market economy in its early stages of growth, ordinary Vietnamese arguably had less to lose economically by challenging the state.

In Burma, where a military-led regime had not yet adjusted to the ways of the modern world, the chances of a violent upheaval were also deemed to be greater. But in these less stable states too, open door economic policies adopted since the late 1980s were enfranchising potential dissenters faster than their ability to organise dissent. In Burma, the military junta’s strategy for consolidating power and political legitimacy appeared to be relying on making people as rich as possible, without too much concern for the inevitable spread of corruption and inefficiency. Pressure for political change in these states fought as hard a battle against the indifference of a population scrambling on to the bandwagon of new economic growth as it did against the intransigence of conservative ruling elites. When Aung San Suu Kyi was arrested and placed under house arrest in July 1989 her popularity among a population starved of economic progress was unmatched. When she gained her freedom in July 1995 her military captors were banking that economic reforms and a measure of growth in urban areas had lent them a modicum of legitimacy. It was a risky assumption.

Generally speaking, the potential political volatility of Southeast Asia has been tempered as much by economic growth, or the prospect of growth, as by strong authoritarian regimes that prevented viable political alternatives from emerging. In the more developed states ruling elites need not fear radical changes to the status quo, so long as there is growth. In emerging economies like that of Burma, where repression is the weapon of choice, even the military junta in Rangoon recognises that ultimately their legitimacy would have to be cemented by spreading wealth.

This was the obverse of thinking in Western countries, where it was assumed that demands for political change naturally
accompanied growth. The May 1989 massacre in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square was offered as proof that economic reform and growth could not be pursued without accompanying political reform. On the contrary, for Southeast Asian leaders in the 1980s and 1990s economic liberalisation acted as a placebo for political reform. What they feared most was economic decline. Losing the pedals of economic growth meant for them a loss of legitimacy. If members of the ruling elites and their supporters looked upon the future with a degree of anxiety it was because no one could safely predict how long the economic boom would last. By the mid-1990s, as if preparing for this more uncertain future beyond growth, both the challengers and guardians of traditional authority were staking out their positions. In the absence of strong political institutions and a free political dialogue, the debate gravitated towards defining the role of tradition and culture.

CORE VALUES

In September 1994, aspiring Thai politician Amnuay Viravan told a lunch time gathering of business people, journalists and academics in Bangkok that the region’s ‘unique cultures’ should be considered ‘a soil in which the seeds of democracy and civic society must be planted’. While this could be taken as a neat rhetorical resolution of the perceived contradiction between indigenous culture and universal democratic values, the implication was that these values are, like plants, dependent on the environment in which they are planted. Dr Amnuay’s metaphor goes right to the heart of the Asian values debate. Across the spectrum of political views there tends to be a consensus on the contribution local traditions and values have made to the region’s prosperity and stability. Even proponents of more liberal political values in the region, cannot help crowing with pride about the resilience of regional identity:

Not long ago, many Westerners saw our societies as bit-players on the wider stage of ‘Asian Drama’, a dark, endless, all-embracing tragedy, where poverty was the main theme and underdevelopment the central plot. Light years away appeared the *son et lumière* of prosperity and progress, being performed with a flourish and fanfare by the rich nations of the industrialised world.
On a rhetorical level, the economic achievements of the past two decades have bred tremendous confidence in the resilience and dynamism of local cultures and traditions in the more developed countries of Southeast Asia. At the same time, the rapid material changes accompanying growth have bred a desire—not just felt by ruling elites, but in society at large—to assert and reinforce customs and traditions widely perceived as threatened by the onslaught of development.

In Burma, where an unpopular military junta is trying to overcome international opprobrium and the threat of economic sanctions and to drag the country out of three decades of isolation, it is surprising to hear a senior official’s concern about the erosion of culture. The junta has implemented a liberal foreign investment law and laid out the welcome mat for foreign businesses. Yet, the line is drawn firmly when it comes to anticipating the impact of the expected growth on cultural values, according to economic planning minister Brigadier General David Abel:

We were a British colony for over a hundred years, but even then we never changed our cultural outlook. We have maintained a strong hold on culture even when other countries have changed without being colonised. I won’t say we’ll stay intact—there may be slight changes. But we won’t totally lose our cultural values. That won’t happen here.\(^\text{10}\)

Burma wants to avoid what it perceives has happened to Thailand—hence Abel’s veiled reference to countries which have changed ‘without being colonised’. The Burmese view Thailand as a country that has abandoned core values in the pursuit of material wealth. Morality and respect for the Buddhist religion have suffered, in their view, from accommodating the foreigner. ‘The government would like to emulate the foreign exchange earnings that a Bangkok tourist trade generates, but wants to avoid the tawdry degradation that has accompanied it’, notes experienced Burma-watcher David Steinberg.\(^\text{11}\)

That is not to say Thais are not concerned about the image their country has acquired as a haven for sex tourists and drug smugglers. Thai artist, Vasan Sittiket dresses in jack-boots, a military uniform and the ornate head gear of a traditional court dancer to pronounce that ‘Thai culture is dead’. His oil painting titled ‘modern cock’, depicting Thais caressing an American flag in
the shape of a penis, was banned from an exhibition at Bangkok’s national gallery. In the rapidly-growing urban centres of Southeast Asia everything from suicide to drug abuse is blamed on the undermining of core values. The most common lament focuses on the nuclear family—the family principle being central to the argument used by political elites in favour of collective order and discipline. Development and prosperity do not always destroy culture and tradition, however.

For some sections of society in the more developed countries of the region, modernisation has impacted on tradition but not always replaced it. In some cases traditional behavioural patterns are magnified or distorted. In Thailand, for instance, prosperity has exaggerated the tendency in middle-class Thai society to display status derived from wealth. This helps explain why middle-class Bangkokians cannot be persuaded to abandon their cars for public transport. As a young hotel executive explained: ‘There is a strong urge to show off wealth in the shape of a $100,000 luxury automobile. People take their kids to school by car simply to show it off.’ Another Bangkokian pressed on why she would not consider taking her child to school on the bus, said that ‘only lower-class people use the bus.’

Agreement on what constitutes the core values of society is not hard to establish. Where there is divergence is on the extent to which these traditions can and should determine political norms. Some Southeast Asian leaders have argued that the anatomy of their societies is less atomistic than the West perceives it to be and that democracy as it is defined in the West has its own cultural environment. Going further, some have claimed that traditional collective social values which place less emphasis on the rights of the individual, are core values without which anarchy would prevail.

Indonesian officials argue, for example, that allowing the views of a minority to determine the future of the majority is dangerous in a multiethnic, multireligious society. As a senior Indonesian army officer once put it: ‘People feel uncomfortable with the notion of less than unanimous support because of the need for harmony, the expression of totality in a cultural and religious context which is highly fractured.’ Hence they consider that 50 plus 1 out of 100 constitutes something much less than a majority. In the contemporary political context even one dissenting voice is considered a threat to consensus. When an Indonesian army general stood up at the March 1988 People’s Assembly to object to
the president’s choice of vice-president, he was initially declared mentally unstable. Individual acts of protest are often portrayed in a negative light. A man who threw a bag of excrement at the Thai commerce minister in September 1994 was represented by a local psychiatrist as someone who may have suffered from severe constipation as a child. Something deep in the cultural psyche of the region relates direct, confrontational dissent with dissonant behaviour.

The ethnic complexity of Malaysian society, in which almost half the population are Muslim Malays, a third are either Buddhist or Christian Chinese, and most of the rest are either Hindus or Christians of Indian origin, is used as the principal excuse for the highly modified structure of Malaysian democracy. Malaysia defends a stringent internal security act that allows detention without trial for periods of two years or more on the grounds that without it, there would be no control over racial or religious extremists. The legislation, originally introduced by the British authorities to deal with the communist insurrection of the late 1940s, was never revoked. The country’s Printing Presses and Publications Act of 1984 states that parliament may impose restrictions on the freedom of the press ‘as it deems necessary or expedient in the interest of security of the Federation, friendly relations with other countries and public order or morality’.15

Singapore with its preponderantly ethnic Chinese population rubbing shoulders with smaller numbers of Malays and Indians follows the same logic. In these plural societies racial integration has been slower to occur because the component ethnic groups are large enough to maintain their distinctiveness. At a social level, the importance of ethnic considerations in face-to-face interaction somewhat limits the autonomy of the individual because of the need to be sensitive to the customs of other races. (This ethnic etiquette breaks down in cyberspace, however. On Malaysian and Singaporean ‘bulletin boards’ ethnic insults are traded freely—and anonymously.) Over time the state has institutionalised these obviously voluntary social mores and turned them into mechanisms of control. For example, it may make sense to restrict freedom of assembly in situations where there is a potential for racial conflict; it becomes something more when a public gathering of more than five people requires a government permit, as in the case of Malaysia.
Behind this sort of thinking lies a strong urge for the imposition of order on society. The prevailing attitude towards popular participation in countries like Indonesia, Thailand, and Burma is that strong government is necessary because the people are too ignorant to help themselves. ‘The people are still stupid [masih bodoh]. They must be guided.’ The phrase, or something like it, is commonly used by Indonesian officials to explain their overbearing top-down approach to administration and development. The Indonesian government’s concept of a cooperative, for instance, is not that of a local-level self-help organisation financed by members’ pooled funds. Instead, the idea is that funds are provided by the government to help the cooperative members and relieve poverty.

Even in Thailand, where civilian-led government since the overthrow of military rule in 1992 has made a firm commitment to political openness, there are precious few signs that the state is ready to relinquish its power to the people. Quite the reverse. Calls for bureaucratic decentralisation and provision for elected local officials in Thailand are being resisted at the centre. A senior Thai military officer put it this way:

We would all like to see the emergence of democracy at some point in the future. But the West should understand that in our culture it is important to secure a sense of unity first.16

For countries like Thailand and the Philippines where democracy by Western standards is judged to be more advanced, liberal pressure groups both inside and outside are pushing for what might be called the next stage—downsizing the state still further by empowering those at the grass roots. Although it might be considered naïve to expect states not defined by a federal constitution to grant localities the autonomy enjoyed under a union like the United States of America, many Southeast Asian states are over-centralised. (As we saw earlier, even Malaysia’s federal system is becoming more, rather than less, politically centralised.) Yet when elected officials who espouse democracy and human rights for the country as a whole are faced by demands for local freedom, they baulk. More often than not they claim that the country still needs the guidance of the centre, or risks falling apart.
Call it paternalistic or feudalist, the urge to guide and dictate to society is the centrepiece of bureaucratic culture in Southeast Asia. This top-down urge to guide society has deep roots. Liberal foreign foundations supporting Thailand’s fledgling democracy are struck by the reluctance of local non-governmental organisations to be drawn into political action. Representatives of these liberal Western organisations complain that despite being given the right to take public stands on developmental issues many Thai NGOs shy away from politics. Their approach was to work at the grassroots level with local communities, essentially showing rural people the way to get things done. What worries some Westerners working with NGOs is the convergence of these attitudes and methods with the paternalism of strong centralised government. Instead of teaching people how to govern their own lives, NGOs insist that people have to be constantly guided—as if from above.17

Local culture and tradition have provided conservative regimes with the tools needed to impose strict control over society. But the impetus to order society so strictly also stems from the more recent history of nation-building. The painful transition to independence experienced by some states and the urgent desire to develop their economies, bred an instinctive belief that social forces should never be permitted to assert themselves at will otherwise chaos would ensue. Unity is a constant, almost obsessive concern. The immediate post-colonial period saw most of the region’s newly independent states embark on a more or less democratic path. In almost every case these democratic beginnings foundered in the wake of internal tensions and threats to the unity of the state.

Indonesia’s struggle for independence was marked by a series of internal revolts fuelled by religious, regional, and ideological divisions. Singapore and Malaysia employed harsh legislation restricting personal freedoms in order to bottle up racial tensions in the early years of independence, and continue to justify the limitation of these freedoms on the same grounds. Burma, of course, fell victim to ethnic conflict almost as soon as the idealistic Union of Burma was established in 1948, prompting the military to intervene in the 1950s. Vietnam had to fight a long and bitter war against the French, who were reluctant to abandon their colony after the Pacific War. The Vietnamese Communist Party’s obsession with maintaining a monopoly of power—even to the point of restricting membership of the Party itself—though
certainly not untypical of communist regimes and echoing the traditional Confucian order, was undoubtedly reinforced by the impact of almost three decades of war.\textsuperscript{18}

Strong states became the means by which people could be guided and kept from dividing the polity. In the case of Thailand, the development of centralised state power in the course of the nineteenth century is sometimes explained as a response to the external threat of the colonial powers. To fashion and maintain strong states in the modern context, political elites have reconstructed traditions, albeit in a rather selective fashion. Drawing on traditions of filial piety (in the Confucian or Chinese context) or collective decision-making and consensus (in the Javanese and Malay context), the impression is given that these societies are culturally disposed to obedience and discipline. Society is projected as tightly bound by a sense of solidarity and commitment to the state. Conveniently omitted from the official renderings are traditional forms of popular sovereignty, which included the right of individuals to make petitions to their rulers and have grievances redressed. For it is important to understand that with or without external pressures for change, there are, and always have been, local voices challenging authority.

The cultural roots of political power and legitimacy in Southeast Asia have been greatly misunderstood. The image of the Asian strongman was indelibly etched on the minds of social scientists from the 1960s onwards. They looked at Indonesia’s Sukarno, Thailand’s Field Marshall prime ministers, Sarit Thanarat and Thanom Kittikachorn, or Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines and considered them model autocrats (not much more sophisticated than Antonio Galvao’s judgement of non-dairy consuming Moluccans.) Some forbearance was given because they governed emerging countries badly in need of growth and development; their leadership produced results and kept communism at bay. Army-led regimes in Thailand and Indonesia were thought to be more purposeful and effective about developing the country — which in reality meant they could be wooed by foreign business interests.

It is dangerous to assume that these strongmen exemplified ideal leaders as judged through the lens of indigenous political culture, however. These ideals can perhaps be found in the purest form at the grass roots level, in the village community. Here there is a definable sense of collective endeavour, a strong stress on family
values, and curbs on individual expression. But there is also a strong sense of justice and above all an aversion to tyranny. It is nonsense to assume that Southeast Asian societies are totally cowed by authority. There is respect for legitimate authority and a higher degree of compliance than many Westerners would be accustomed to. But the abuse of authority has always been contested by these societies, and in this sense the definition of social discipline propounded by proponents of Asian values can easily be distorted. Recent political history has been marked by short but effective bursts of popular protest against tyranny.

In 1965, pent-up frustration felt by students and professionals angered by Sukarno’s revolutionary hyperbole burst on to the streets of Jakarta after the 30 September coup attempt weakened Sukarno’s grip on power. In Thailand, students successfully toppled a military dictatorship in 1973. In 1986 people took to the streets of Manila to force Ferdinand Marcos out of power. Two years later, Burma erupted in mass protests against an inept and creaking regime led by an ageing general. In all these cases there were invisible, manipulative political forces at work, but the strength of public sentiment was real enough. What drives people to rebel against authority, as it does the world over, is the sustained abuse of power and disregard for civil liberties. Effective repression and culturally driven acquiescence does, however, explain why popular unrest can remain suppressed over longer periods. But just because popular grievances do not get aired so openly in Southeast Asian societies does not mean they are not deeply felt.

Not all the cultural ideals embodied by the region’s state ideologies should be dismissed. There is a great deal to be said for the formulation of religious and ethnic tolerance included in Indonesia’s ‘Five principles’ or Pancasila. Most democratic activists in contemporary Indonesia can find nothing authoritarian about a creed which stipulates equality, social justice and freedom of worship for all. What they argue about is the way Pancasila has been implemented. Pancasila has been used as a tool for stifling dissent and denying freedom, they say. It has not been utilised as a guide for government and people alike, but rather as a way for the government to impose order on the people. This suggests that Pancasila as a set of principles is not the obstacle to expressing popular sovereignty, rather it is the way it has been deployed.
The distortion of core values has taken place at the state level. In fact, modern urban existence and the capitalist system has begun to erode the traditional collective values which the ruling elites claim lie at the core of their cultures. Opportunities for material advancement offered by growth have encouraged the pursuit of individual interests. Urban migration has inevitably disrupted family values and forced individual members of society to fend for themselves. In the process, they are less likely to conceive of themselves as belonging to a certain station in life.

Ironically, and perhaps significantly, this erosion of indigenous collective values has tended not to generate praise for the triumph of the individual over the state. Instead, liberals and conservatives alike are worried about what is happening to the fabric of their society. A Thai newspaper editor, now in academia, reflected thus:

Thais once lived in a moderately comfortable environment. They were generous. They had good mental health and ethics. But now they behave more like machines. Each day they are programmed to pump out money and increase consumption. They compete ruthlessly, become strenuous and mean. In their violent struggle for power, they choose to embezzle and cheat.

More will be said about the perceived moral malaise in Southeast Asian society in Chapter 5. But it is perhaps worth noting here that the claiming of core values by ruling elites in Southeast Asia is not purely a top-down political process. There is a sense in which some of these societies are also looking for assurance and explanations as to where they are headed in an increasingly materialistic world.

ELITIST CORES

It is often argued by critics of the harsher regimes in Southeast Asia that claims of cultural distinctiveness, or pleas for time in order to foster more democratic awareness, are less the reflection of fundamental differences, or Asian values, and more the excuses of stubborn political elites unwilling to change their ways. From the conservative core of these elites comes the argument for a set of social and cultural values at odds with Western culture. Are they stalling in the face of external and internal criticism, or are they
right? There is no diplomatic answer to this question except to question the parity between official and public perceptions of what constitutes culture.

The arguments are lively, if not always convincing. However, the fact that Southeast Asians are themselves arguing over what constitutes the right model of political freedom is itself a symptom of political pluralism. Take this exchange between two letter writers in the Indonesian news magazine Tempo, which was banned in June 1994, Both correspondents were Indonesians living overseas, yet they differed completely in their approach. ‘AS’ from Germany argued that he saw no reason why Indonesia should mimic Western-style democracy because as an Asian country society was organised differently. A few weeks later, ‘MB’ from Australia fired back at ‘AB’ with the argument that the right to free speech and expression was a fundamental human right.

One of the most moderate arguments against the Western human rights agenda can accept the principles but argues that the region’s societies will need time to attain either the political maturity or the economic prosperity required to foster an understanding of democracy and human rights. Progress towards these ideals is something all Asian countries would like to see, some ASEAN officials insist, but it takes time. As one Singaporean official put it:

The ideal of human rights is compelling because this is an imperfect world and we must strive to make it better. Yet precisely because it is an imperfect world, progress on human rights will be marked by ambiguity, compromise, and at times even contradiction.¹⁹

Sometimes it is hard to distinguish between compromise and contradiction. Despite the rhetoric of uncompromising leaders like Mahathir Mohamad and Lee Kuan Yew, the orthodoxy of their view is now being questioned. In Singapore, there is a degree of concern that public acceptance of an overbearing state that feels compelled to tell citizens how to run their lives may be waning. The worry is that the next generation of Singaporeans will not accept a state which frowns on individual initiative and insists that their survival is at stake. Demonstrating its characteristic pragmatism—as well as an instinct for preservation—Singapore’s ruling elite took measured steps to relax and encourage more
popular expression in the early 1990s. On a superficial level this meant that adult Singaporeans could watch soft-porn movies and more foreign news broadcasts. But the aim is certainly not a liberal free for all. Trimming the banyan tree’ was not a licence to saw off whole limbs and branches. The idea is clearly to meet critics of the system half-way; to effect a compromise and preserve the system essentially as it is. Hence the tolerance of mildly questioning voices like this from Leslie Fong, the editor of the Straits Times:

Where vision of what Singapore should strive to be is concerned, there is no monopoly of wisdom by anyone. It is for every thinking person to contribute his bit on what he judges to be not only desirable but achievable.20

Significantly, Fong was careful to add a politically-correct rider: the sense of unease when too much power is invested in one institution, he wrote, ‘is as much a Confucian tradition as it is a Western liberal one’.

If core values are being manipulated or concocted and imposed top-down on society to maintain control over society, then how does society conceive of itself? It is not easy to measure the contemporary cultural heartbeat in Southeast Asia because of the eclecticism so endemic to the region. Culture itself can be defined in many ways. In a recent interview, members of a Malaysian pop group were accused of ‘apeing’ Western culture. ‘We live in brick houses, wear suits, and drive cars. If that is not Western, I don’t know what is’, came back their angry response. Equally it is too simplistic to assume that all Southeast Asia’s societies are being milled into prefect replicas of ‘Middletown’ USA. Another Malaysian pop musician on the same subject said: ‘Culture isn’t what you wear, it’s what you feel inside.’21

The most common assumption is that Southeast Asians, especially the younger generation, are hooked on Western culture. They like the affluence and freedom it imparts. The tendency to equate the desire for material aspects of Western culture with a yearning for freedom stems from official control over access to Western culture which was, and in some countries still is, considered a corrupting influence on local tradition. Just as the Economist has argued that a good way to measure the purchasing parity of world currencies is to compare the price of a ‘Big Mac’, so perceptions of political freedom are often unconsciously
determined by whether teenagers can listen to heavy metal music legally.

Southeast Asians may have grasped the material aspects of Western culture, and not fully absorbed the rest, however. Youth culture in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia is not fully Westernised. Young students who enjoy eating at McDonalds and wearing Reebok or Nike training shoes, may at the same time find moral refuge in the preaching of an Islamic radical, or a Buddhist ascetic monk. Even more startling examples of this selective acculturation are the Malaysian students sent to American universities to avoid the clutches of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East who are attracted to ascetic Islamic teaching in the bosom of their leafy mid-Western campuses. This suggests a bifurcation of youth culture. The material aspects can be Western; the ideology is that of the mosque, the temple, or the charismatic church. In Chapter 5 more will be said about the importance of religion as an ideological catalyst for new political thinking that attempts to distinguish itself from the West.

Economic prosperity and political stability have bred confidence among Southeast Asians, but their eclectic nature has not changed. Walk into any urban bookstore in Kuala Lumpur or Singapore, and the demand for books on how to succeed in business is very evident. But the range of cultures drawn upon to tell people how to make their first million ranges from the art of Chinese geomancy to the wisdom of US auto executive Lee Iacocca. Similarly, the liberal image projected by Western civilisation has great appeal, and there are a growing number of local voices promoting its merits. A survey conducted among young people in Jakarta in May 1993 found a consistently high percentage of awareness on a host of rights including the right to be equal before the law, freedom of conscience, religion, expression and association. On whether or not they were aware of the right to express themselves freely—either verbally or in writing—82.6 per cent of the 500 respondents surveyed answered in the affirmative. Only 4.6 per cent said that right should be exercised responsibly, and only one respondent said the right of expression was there as long as the opinion expressed was supportive of the government.22

Yet this appeal of liberal values competes in a market place of escapist opportunities bred by the failure of governments to provide avenues of expression for the young, especially in urban areas. One way adolescent Thais escape the ennui is to drink and
take drugs to excess. Raging Saturday night binges are a common pursuit of teenagers not yet out of high school in the Northern Thai city of Chiangmai. Alcohol and other substance abuse often leads to casual sex and fuels runaway increases in the level of HIV infection among young Thais which are among the highest in the region. Experts are at a loss to explain the root cause of this often fatal escapism, but many point to the pernicious cocktail of lax morality stemming from the break up of the family unit and material aspirations acquired from commercial television. In Malaysia, a government survey of young people aged between 13 and 21 in 1994 found that 71 per cent smoked, 40 per cent watched pornographic videos, 28 per cent gambled, 25 per cent drank alcohol and 14 per cent took hard drugs.

Large numbers of young people are also attracted to religion and indigenous spiritualism as a means of escape. Fatalism and values of life more in tune with age-old traditional values dominate the thoughts of teenagers who risk their lives racing motor-cycles on the streets of Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok or Ho Chi Minh City. The flowing green robes and turban worn by members of the Al Arqam movement were a common sight in Malaysia until the movement was banned in mid-1994. The government feared the movement’s popularity, especially among young Malays disenchanted with the rigours of city life. Thousands of young people gave up their comfortable materialistic lives to live in communes, following the vague teachings of a former Islamic preacher and Islamic political activist, Sheikh Imam Ashaari Mohamad. Pragmatic asceticism might be a good way of describing the way of life followed by Arqam devotees. Their spiritual leader publicly exhorted them to ‘love God and think of the hereafter’. But while life was outwardly simple, and as close to the way they imagined the early Islamic believers lived it in seventh-century Arabia, the organisation ran a number of successful businesses and was not short of funds. What’s more, Al Arqam claimed a world-wide membership of around 200,000.

For all the Malaysian government’s public moralising about the evils of Western culture, it worried about Arqam’s harsh rejection of Western-style materialism. According to a senior Malaysian official with a religious background, ‘there is concern that extremist organisations like Arqam have penetrated the urban middle classes’. Mahathir likes to talk about an approach to religion that can be both spiritual and progressive. Ashaari’s
response was: ‘We are progressive. We build schools. The government is not progressive because it is not serving the people’s interests, but only those of certain individuals.’ The more Ashaari highlighted the corruption and pursuit of personal interests in Malaysian elite circles, the more concerned the authorities became. But people also began to look more closely at the bearded youths behind heavy black eye make-up in their ubiquitous dark green robes; and what they saw was a fresh, moral approach to life, no matter how austere. The potential appeal eventually brought the full force of the law to bear on the movement.

To claim a homogeneous official or common culture against this heterogeneous context clearly misrepresents reality. Seemingly less flimsy than the cultural argument against political change is the plea for time. A common official explanation is that sudden or hastily implemented political change would threaten these countries with instability; that in Indonesia and Malaysia a sudden loosening of strict controls over society might lead to political polarisation—along either ethnic or religious lines. Of course, this kind of fear can be deliberately provoked to encourage people to believe in the constant need for political control and vigilence. In fact, the slow pace of political change may act as a catalyst for unrest because there are no avenues for redressing social and economic grievances.

In Indonesia there were several violent acts committed against Christian churches in Java in the course of 1993 which looked like a worrying by-product of the resentment building up in Islamic circles over the perceived inequalities of wealth between religious communities. In April 1994, a labour protest got out of hand in the North Sumatran capital Medan and an ethnic Chinese businessman was killed. Despite the involvement of some 20,000 workers, and repeated attempts by labour leaders to present their grievances to the provincial authorities, the armed forces publicly took the view that the protest was an illegal riot, bent on provoking violence against Medan’s considerable Chinese population.

In elite Indonesian circles there is an allergy to spontaneous popular expression because the focus of popular expression inevitably seizes on ethnic and religious differences, or the gap between rich and poor. It may be in the interests of competing elite interests to organise demonstrations to demonstrate popular
support, but quite another to allow the populace to express themselves in an unbridled, spontaneous fashion. See what happens when they do. In early 1993 teenage rock fans ran riot through a rich Jakarta suburb after a concert by the Western rock band Metallica. The homes of the rich and their fancy cars were deliberately targeted. Confusing this outburst of youthful frustration with more traditional resentment of the wealthy overseas Chinese, one senior government official came running out of his house shouting that he was a *präbümì*, or native Indonesian. The rioters paid no heed and burnt his car all the same.29

Free expression, whether on the campus or by a free trade union on the factory shop floor, is greatly feared by ruling establishments in the region and the business interests close to them. Controlled, channelled and ultimately co-opted, the path trod by those who choose to assert their right to free speech is never smooth. When Indonesian newspaper editor Eros Djarot tried to reopen his popular tabloid *De-Tik* after the government closed it down in June 1994, the successor publication, *Simponi*, was quickly closed on a technicality—its editor was found not to be a member of the state-backed Union of Indonesian Journalists. Being a journalist in Indonesia, suggested Goenawan Mohamad, the editor of *Tempo*, another banned publication; ‘is like being a pilot hi-jacked in mid-air’. The editor of a Malaysian Chinese language newspaper explained why he had been trying to resign for the past two years in these terms:

> As a journalist I can never think of playing the watchdog, questioning the actions of those in power. As journalists we have to be compatible with the establishment. We are only running a vehicle. If the government feels comfortable with it, we will survive.30

The problem is that the very areas of society Western governments would like to see liberalised are considered by those who hold power as the key to enduring prosperity and stability, and to containing political challenge. Not that there is an easily measured popular consensus of this view. Here perhaps indigenously-driven liberalisation must be separated from the rhetoric of Western policy on human rights and democracy. There is also merit in considering democracy in a conceptual sense, rather than as a precise set of institutions. For with or without Western pressure,
social and economic change is influencing local political trends and promoting more individual freedom, if not democracy in the strictest sense.

**TOWARDS A MIDDLE GROUND**

Twenty years ago a less educated, less urbanised population was more susceptible to the primordial ethnic or religious tension most governments in the region feared would ensue if democracy was given a free rein. In some countries the pace and structure of economic growth is making it necessary to loosen traditional collective bonds and grant more individuals the space to be creative and innovative. In this sense, an infusion of Western values which have helped promote innovativeness and leadership in industry could be the key to Southeast Asia’s economic survival. Traditional regard for collective action and rigorous self-discipline might hinder the absorption of technology on which the region’s economic future now depends.

Take the new generation of hi-tech electronics factories being built in Singapore and Malaysia. In the 1970s companies like Motorola, Hewlett Packard and Hitachi gravitated to these locations because labour was cheap and plentiful. Though cost margins remain attractive for this reason, the highly automated manufacturing processes and rigorous quality control standards employed in the industry today also demand a measure of ability and creativity from the workforce. ‘Better, faster, cheaper, by working smarter’ runs the slogan a new hard-disk manufacturing firm in Penang has introduced to its workforce. ‘Not by working harder or longer, but by being creative. We want a thinking workforce, not just a working workforce’, stressed the firm’s managing director.31

Nearly a decade of liberal economic reform and deregulation has generated a robust private sector which makes demands of governments and bureaucracies that not so long ago made all the economic decisions. These economies themselves can no longer rely on exports of primary commodities—simple trading operations that could be monopolised by the bureaucracy. To maintain the momentum, industry must move downstream and diversify into areas which require innovative technological skills. Just as the children of rice farmers or rubber tappers are assembling air-conditioners today, their children will be developing
software or refining synthetic fuels. There is already a shortage of skilled management personnel in most ASEAN countries. More alarmingly, the innovative skills of the region’s scientific community are poorly developed.

In Malaysia a mobile telephone manufacturing company advertised for over a year for a senior technician in 1993—and still could not fill the job. Those who fill such jobs are usually so highly valued they jump from job to job, lured by higher salaries. Although the lacunae in Southeast Asia’s skilled job market can be blamed on poor educational planning, it has much to do with the core values instilled in the region’s schools. Learning by rote and too much collective discipline does little to promote technical skills, which must then be acquired at great expense overseas, and therefore by fewer people.

To accommodate these changes, governments will have to adapt politically—or lose the ability to maintain the economic momentum which sustains their legitimacy. It is one thing for Lee Kuan Yew to insist that Southeast Asians reject the ‘American’ view that ‘out of the clash of different ideas and ideals you get good government’. It is quite another to expect Southeast Asians to compete in the global market place of ideas without the freedom to express their ideas. The initiative to invest offshore and create new areas of economic expansion will not come from a generation bridled by harsh social and political control.

At the same time, the process of wealth creation has created new fissures in these societies. Socioeconomic disparities are widening. In Thailand and Indonesia there is an alarming gulf between the very rich and the very poor. If only 3 per cent of Bangkok’s population live below a poverty line officially determined as income less than Baht 4,000 a year, this number rises to 37 per cent in the north-eastern region, and over 20 per cent in the North. Poverty in Indonesia may have fallen below 20 per cent of the population, but it is now extremely localised, rising to as much as 40 per cent in some eastern provinces according to World Bank estimates. Even more sensitive in political terms is the disparity in middle-class incomes; civil servants earning barely US$ 500–1,000 can read in the newspaper about the owner of a bank who throws a wedding party for 5,000 guests. A Singaporean official talks about the ‘wage gap’ between skilled workers commanding ‘first world prices’ and unskilled workers facing ‘third world wages’. ‘Politics in the future will be the politics of envy’, another Singaporean
official suggests. With a much higher percentage of people acquiring secondary and tertiary education, many more Southeast Asians already have the literate ability to express this envy, and they are likely to do so by demanding a much bigger say in how the state is run. These are realities the governments of the region have to face—but the time scale may be rather different from that envisaged in the West.

In the interim, there will be a rather slower process of adaptation—a blend of established political tradition with the needs of a more challenging economic future. Hence the emergence in countries like Indonesia and Malaysia of powerful private sector lobby groups. In Indonesia, Andrew Macintyre detected sections of the business class that have, through ‘bargaining and coalition building’, begun to influence state decisions. It is too early, perhaps, to see these emerging interest groups as champions of political freedom. Their priority is a profitable business climate, which very often means support for the status quo. In Thailand, the business community initially supported the 1991 military coup. They wanted an end to the perceived corruption prevailing in the late 1980s under the elected government of Chatichai Choonhavan. When they saw the military’s lack of popular support, they swung behind an elected civilian government again. Tired of the inaction and indecisive leadership of the elected civilian government they swung back in favour of a firmer, more conservative leadership in 1995. Only this time, some of the corporate actors entered the political arena themselves.

In the Southeast Asian context the business community’s commitment to democracy is ambivalent. The corporate sector has learnt to put the interests of its patrons before those of the workforce. Partly, this stems from the residual fears of overseas Chinese, who dominate commerce in most Southeast Asian countries, about their status and security. In the struggle to control the abuse of Vietnam’s cheap labour the government found that the worst offenders were Asian companies. Businessmen who are vocal about the need for a freer market, are not necessarily advocates of free trade unions. A senior member of Thailand’s Federation of Trade and Industry described labour unions as a ‘foreign culture’. In 1995, the Thai textile industry proposed setting up a minimum wage free zone along the Thai-Burmese border so that cheap Burmese labour could be safely exploited. The problem is likely to get worse before it gets better. Some will
say that unmitigated exploitation was the key to early industrial development in the West. Meanwhile, in most of the more developed Southeast Asian states, the competitive advantage of cheap labour and low production costs is rapidly being eroded by the spiralling cost of labour and infrastructure. Hence resistance to granting full worker rights can be cast as a nationalist struggle to maintain competitiveness, as it has been in Malaysia.

Some inertia, therefore, needs to be factored in to the political development of Southeast Asia over the next two decades. The prevailing ruling elites and business class are fundamentally conservative. They hide behind a culture of power that demands acceptance of strong leadership and unquestioned loyalty to the state. More liberal elements of the middle class—intellectuals, writers, and non-governmental activists—are a minority without the political or financial means to assert themselves. For now they must rely on the sympathy and support of outside lobbies. The struggle for independence and later against Communism has bred deep suspicion of external influence in the surviving nationalist leaders of the 1940s and 1950s. It also gave them the means of wielding near-absolute power that no politician is so eager to yield. They in turn have passed this political culture on to the generation groomed to succeed them—together with the institutions of control. Their successors may not share the same prejudices but there is no guarantee as yet that they won’t savour the same measure of power and authority.

Neither should the possibility of a conservative backlash to the extent of liberalisation achieved so far be ruled out. There are signs of this in Indonesia where prodding by Western donors to open up the economy has not been matched by regulatory controls. With the widening of economic disparities this has brought about, the reaction has been to clamour for state intervention to maintain social harmony. Western pressure does not help. To establish political legitimacy and popularity the new generation of leaders could well tap new sources of nationalist sentiment. They might find perceptions of a clash of values and cultural decoupling useful in the formulation of this new nationalist ideology. There are already faint signs of this in the new Islamic-backed political movement hoping to dislodge the military from power in Indonesia. In Malaysia, the young Islamic idealists planning Anwar Ibrahim’s rise to power are searching for a new nationalist ideology which blends Islamic religious values with
indigenous cultural norms and entails some distancing from the West.

While education, access to information, and enhanced prosperity have unquestionably bred a degree of popular unease with strict social and political control, broad-based calls for participation in government could easily be offset by fears of instability should political change be introduced too quickly. The middle classes of Asia are fundamentally conservative too. Indonesia’s middle class is not sufficiently broad-based or numerous to bridge the gap between rich and poor. They fear the popular backlash against their wealth more political freedom could unleash; they are tied to the system which generated the wealth they now enjoy:

The Jakarta middle class, like other classes, only struggle for their own practical interests.... They realise that there are a number of unjust practices in their own society, but at the same time they realise that nothing can be done to solve the problems. As a privileged class, they tend to be charitable to the underdog. There is, as such, [something] of the noblesse oblige ideology of the European aristocracy.33

Indonesian sociologist Benny Subianto concludes that to assume the Indonesian middle class will play a role similar to that of the European bourgeoisie of the eighteenth century is misleading. The Indonesian middle class, he believes, is a creation of the state and therefore very much tied to state policy. In much the same way the Malaysian middle class—proportionally a much larger cohort in society—is a prisoner of the state’s strict control over interethnic interaction. Malaysians are told that their society comprises of a ‘diverse and incompatible ethnic and religious mix’. Strong leadership is required to ensure that the different ethnic groups don’t leap at each other’s throats. Hence Malaysians of all races and whatever class tend to live in fear of ethnic strife and generally support the government’s tough controls on the freedom of expression. ‘There is this code of silence, we don’t talk about certain things in front of people from other races. This is what I find so stifling’, said a Malaysian academic who spent many years overseas. So much for the much vaunted power of the middle class.

The political landscape of Southeast Asia is changing, and it is a pity that the complexity of these changes is being obscured by the
obsession with matching the pace and form of political change to Western standards. The key question is not whether political change matches Western standards, but rather whether these changes will satisfy domestic demands and needs. If there is no dispute about the direction of change, there are certainly differences over how it should be defined. Therefore the best approach to preventing a confrontation over the meaning of shared values would be to find a middle ground which limits the scope for semantic argument. In short, while alternative definitions of human rights and democracy must be avoided, there is room for a formula which narrows the gulf of misunderstanding and makes allowances for regional sensitivities.

Democracy in Southeast Asia is likely to be narrowly defined and guided for some time to come. Less adversarial and steering shy of small group advocacy, officially sanctioned forms of political expression will continue to appear underdeveloped in Western eyes. But the governments of Southeast Asia will ignore the need to broaden the popular base of government at their peril. The problem, as seen by former US ambassador Morton Abramowitz, is ‘to find a balance between order and personal freedom’.34

Finding a compromise formula will seem like a see-saw between increasing popular demand for participation, and co-option of those who the elite permits to participate. Describing this interim stage, observers have coined terms like ‘demi-democracy’, or ‘modified democracy’. The most positive result could be what Malaysian intellectual Syed Farid Alatas calls the triumph of ‘elements of democracy’. There will be a greater role for lobbying by pressure groups and NGOs in a controlled fashion, allowing enclaves of Western-style advocacy to thrive under controlled conditions—but for the time being subject to sanction or co-option. The rigidity and tenacity of the strong, anti-democratic state in Southeast Asia seems to ensure its survival, but does not guarantee its effectiveness. Instead of being replaced, Thai academic Chai-anan Samudavanija envisages a ‘bypass’ process. Helping to limit the relevance and effectiveness of the strong state, he argues is the trend towards globalisation and regionalism:

Supra nationality and internationalisation, in my view, will lead to new phenomena in state-society relations which I call
bypassing the state by grass roots groups and their transnational coalitions.\textsuperscript{35}

Something like this process can already be observed in the region. Protectionist lobbies in the business community or the bureaucracy are being overcome by a regional consensus on free trade; human rights concerns are being expressed at a regional level by local NGOs, which makes it harder for governments to blame the interfering West. Professor Chai-anan may have a point, but he is wise enough to add that he feels strong states will not just whither away. Change they will, but it will be a slow process, always subject to adaptation, and possibly even reversal should economic or political insecurity demand the reassertion of strong leadership. Putting it another way, prominent Thai academic Sukhumbhand Paribatra considers that globalisation is certainly forcing governments of the region to become more transparent, ‘but that does not make them more democratic’.\textsuperscript{36}

History has shown that Southeast Asian societies are successful because of their inherent flexibility, their openness to change. While there is currently broad agreement in Southeast Asia that the rigorous imposition of Western-style democracy runs counter to prevailing social and political traditions, the key to the future is likely to be a balanced, gradual process of change. As Lee Kuan Yew predicts:

Every country must evolve its own style of representative government. Indeed, a country is not likely to succeed unless it adapts or modifies US or European democratic practices to fit its different circumstances.\textsuperscript{37}

If he is right, it seems odd that the clash of values with the West has occurred at all, or has not already dissipated. Perhaps this says more about Western insecurities than Asian shortcomings.
Chapter 5
The religious challenge to authority

*After me there will be caliphs; and after the caliphs, amirs; and after the amirs, kings; and after the kings, tyrants... hadith (tradition) attributed to the Prophet Mohammed*

Every Tuesday and Thursday, crowds of middle-class Thais gather at the base of an equestrian statue of the late King Rama V in central Bangkok to make offerings and pray. With mobile phones strapped to their waists, their BMWs parked nearby, and perhaps a dinner appointment with clients still to go, Bangkok’s yuppies make time to pay homage to the monarch they consider made their prosperous lifestyle possible.

Rama V, or King Chulalongkorn, died in 1910 after a long reign during which he abolished slavery, modernised the fiscal system, and built the country’s first modern schools. Every Thai student knows Rama V as a reforming King, but only relatively recently has his memory been revered in a religious rite. On some nights, thousands of people throng the broad square on Rajdamnoen Avenue where the bronze equestrian statue stands. They lay out rush mats on which they erect small altars with portraits of the King, a kindly-looking man with a fine moustache. Offerings of brandy, cigars and pink roses are favoured because it is believed the King was something of a *bon-viveur*. The ritual bears all the hallmarks of a cult. Young professionals wear gold and diamond-studded amulets bearing his portrait; his portrait adorns office walls, the inside of taxi-cabs and buses; and a minor industry has sprung up reproducing pictures of the late King. There are even photographers who offer studio portraits where the subject is dressed in the Edwardian garb fashionable during his reign.
What draws young professional Thais, with their garlands and offerings of incense, to the statue of Rama V? Why aren’t they seeking solace in more modern forms of escapism? Why not take advice from a lawyer or a psychiatrist, rather than a dead king? The answer is that even in a society modernising as rapidly as Thailand’s, people turn to traditional symbols and beliefs in search of luck or solace. Chulalongkorn, as we saw earlier, abolished slavery and was the father of modern education in Thailand; but he also showed Thais the way to modernise without losing their sense of identity. For Thais, he was an exemplary nationalist. In this sense, he has become a powerful symbol of Thai identity in the face of the erosive forces of modernity; a protective talisman for those who find that chasing wealth and status in Thailand’s high-rolling economy taxes their cultural and spiritual beliefs. Devotion to this ideal image of a past monarch also points to a desire for a tangible faith; something innately spiritual. Despite the modernisation of everything from medicine and management, Thais look for strength in their country’s spiritual traditions.

Everywhere one looks in Southeast Asia, religion is an important part of personal and social life. Every year the Governor of the northern Thai city of Chiangmai conducts an elaborate Buddhist ceremony involving a sacred phallic city pillar to ensure the continued safety of the city and its inhabitants. In modern Burma, village children learn to read and write at pagoda schools, and when they attain adulthood will periodically spend a month or so wearing the saffron robes of the monkhood. In the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur, it is *de rigueur* for the Prime Minister and every Muslim member of his cabinet to attend midday Friday prayers at the National Mosque—parliament does not sit on Friday. Every year in Indonesia, the world’s largest Muslim country with a per capita GDP of around US$ 700, some 160,000 people each spend the equivalent of nearly US$ 7,000 to make the holy pilgrimage to Mecca. In Singapore, Christian revivalist faiths attract more and more of the island republic’s new rich. ‘They seem to want to justify their material gains as a heavenly reward’, suggests a local writer.1

What does the tenacity of religious devotion in the modern context tell us about Southeast Asian society? In general terms, it underlines the fact that, contrary to widely held predictions about the course of modernisation, religious identity in Southeast Asia is still very much part of the fabric of society. Classical Weberian
sociological theory argues that with modernisation, primordial religious beliefs are eventually replaced by secular national and civic values. But this vision of a despiritualised society seems misplaced in Southeast Asia. Indeed, it would be hard for religious beliefs to be eroded in a region where religion continues to play a role in defining statehood. In Thailand, Buddhism is an important pillar of the state, as it is in Burma, Laos and Cambodia. The official motto of the Kingdom of Cambodia is ‘Nation, Religion, King’. Islam is not only the official religion of Malaysia and Brunei; Muslim identity also infers a distinct cultural and racial identity. In the case of Brunei, an official ideology has been built around the concept of an indivisible nexus between Malay ethnic identity, Islam and the Monarchy. Indonesia’s plural society, where Muslims account for as much as 90 per cent of the population today, carefully avoids regarding Islam as the state religion. Nevertheless the official position is that Indonesia is a religious rather than a secular state.

That is not to say that religion has not been affected by modernity. Materialism has been the principal side-effect of contemporary growth in a region where religious beliefs idealise charity and frugality. As in Western societies, the contest between God and Mammon at first sight appears fairly one-sided. But instead of shrugging off religion in favour of material gain, Southeast Asians have learned to plough their wealth into religious rituals. People in Thailand and Singapore spend increasing sums of money on ever more elaborate religious and spiritual rites—whether it is the multimillion dollar trade in Buddhist amulets, or the opulence of a modern Chinese funeral. Islam too, has become gentrified in this way, with lavish spending on rituals like breaking the fast during the month of Ramadan, or on the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. A young Indonesian professional explains:

More and more people now go on the haj when they are relatively young, while formerly only older people went on the pilgrimage. Besides, reasons of piety, going on the pilgrimage to Mecca is also a sure sign of economic affluence.  

The amount of money people are willing to spend on spiritual salvation only underscores the importance of religion more heavily.
As well as fulfilling spiritual needs, religion in Southeast Asia is more closely associated with politics—at least the boundary between secular and spiritual affairs is not always distinct. Religion is as inherent to the political process in Southeast Asia as the administrative principles inherited from the Western colonial powers, and the fact that religion governs the lives of Southeast Asians with more intensity may also have intriguing implications for the political future of the region. Earlier it was argued that the reassertion of premodern traditions of power and authority has not so far been successfully challenged using the idiom of Western liberal politics. Ruling political elites have instead manipulated indigenous culture to justify strong government and controls over individual freedom. But society has not always been dependent on the thought of Rousseau or Jefferson to combat tyranny and inequality. Traditionally, threats to the established political order in Southeast Asia have in fact been rather commonly articulated from the higher moral ground of the mosque or temple. Rulers of ancient Southeast Asian states co-opted religion and established themselves as the source of moral goodness and focus of cosmic order. Unlike the medieval monarchs of Europe, who were hobbled by the power of Rome, they never allowed the ‘clergy’ to play an independent role.

Despite the state’s co-option of the spiritual domain, religion has played a role in challenging state power. Islamic preachers in the fifteenth century helped transform the Hindu-Buddhist monolithic kingdoms on Java and the Malay peninsular into minor princely states ruled by Muslim sultans. In the nineteenth century, religious teaching inspired the first nationalist movements to challenge European rule in Burma and Indonesia. A Burmese Buddhist monk, U Ottama, influenced by the Congress movement in India, helped initiate agitation against British rule in the 1920s. In Indonesia, Muslim merchants incensed by the lack of fair treatment under Dutch rule and influenced by early Islamic notions of nationalism acquired on pilgrimages to the Middle East, formed Sarekat Islam, one of the earliest associations to combat colonial rule. Though seldom played up by present-day governments in Southeast Asia, the fires of nationalism were arguably kindled in the grounds of the temple or mosque.

Modern religions, specifically Islam and Theravada Buddhism, have had a far greater impact on political culture in Southeast Asia than any secular teaching. Arguably, the introduction of Islam to
the region complicated the rigidly hierarchical relationship between rulers and the ruled that imported Hinduism had encouraged. In the 1930s, the Indonesian nationalist Sutan Sjahrir asked:

whether Islam, with regard to Hinduism, does not play the same role in history that Protestantism did against Catholicism in Europe, viz., articulating a bourgeois view of life against a feudal one.3

Islam came to Southeast Asia around the fifteenth century, at the apogee of the medieval Islamic world. As A.C.Milner points out, the new religion at first appealed to local rulers; they were attracted to the universal enlightenment imbued by its teaching. Later on, these rulers became vulnerable to reformist trends in the Islamic world that attacked kingship and the lofty and inaccessible mysticism in which it was wrapped.4 ‘There must be no obedience in transgression [against God]’, runs a frequently cited traditional saying ascribed to the Prophet Mohammed.

Probably because of the historical potency of religion as a factor in politics, modern Southeast Asian states have emulated their premodern forbears by circumscribing and co-opting religion under the umbrella of the state. In the modern period, the clearest example is in Indonesia, where early attempts by Muslim activists to impose their imprint on the constitution of the new republic after 1945 were rebuffed, and religion was carefully corralled into a constricted space governed by more secular considerations of order. Perhaps the most important function of Indonesia’s Pancasila state ideology is that it enjoins Islam, the religion of the majority, to tolerate other creeds. Likewise, communist rulers in Vietnam and Cambodia made efforts to erase the populist role played by the Buddhist clergy.5

In modern Thailand, political legitimacy can still be derived from association with the Buddhist church. Many a politician assumes the saffron robe to help establish his moral credibility. In the 1990s, urban voters were drawn to the Palang Dharma Party led by Major General Chamlong Srimuang, who consciously drew on the teachings of an ascetic Buddhist sect known as Santi Asoke. ‘Although the rulers may cling to the state machinery, the common people must be able to use religion and morality to rule themselves more effectively’, asserts Thai social critic Sulak Sivaraksa.6 This tension between state and society over acceptable moral norms
runs deep in Malaysia, where the Muslim-Malay dominated ruling establishment wages an awkward battle against dogmatic Islamic activists struggling to establish an Islamic state—a contest it cannot hope to win outright without losing its own Islamic legitimacy.

In the search for catalysts of political change in Southeast Asia, the tendency has been to assume the primacy of new and modern (i.e. Western) ideas about civic-state relations. While these ideas are important, they are not the exclusive source of political change. An equally potent challenge to established authority could stem from a revival of traditional religious and moral values. There are two separate, but converging reasons why this could happen in Southeast Asia. The first stems from changes in the political idiom which have in fact rendered modern secular ideologies and models less relevant, or morally bankrupt. In short, Communism failed, socialism died, and the ideological fuel of anti-colonial nationalism ran low. While it is fashionable in some quarters to consider that Western liberal political values triumphed after the end of the Cold War, there are other claimants to the emerging New World Order. The perceived moral and economic decline of the West, and its failure to resolve post-Cold War conflicts has inspired alternative visions:

Islam is emerging as a new patron, offering the City of God alternative to the otherwise secular, capitalist Western model (and/or Eastern Stalinist model) in a world which is expected to continue to be unstable in the coming years.⁷

Reflecting this global trend, two decades of sustained and often rapid economic growth in the region has imposed strains on societies in Southeast Asia. Inequitable distribution of wealth has generated social and moral concerns which a simple diet of order and discipline has proved incapable of resolving. Even the older generation of leaders in the region recognise this:

We are agricultural societies that have industrialised within one or two generations. What happened in the West over 200 years or more is happening here in about 50 years or less. It is all crammed and crushed into a very tight time frame, so there are bound to be dislocations and malfunctions.⁸
Significantly, Lee Kuan Yew sees these stresses in society being channelled into religious rather than political beliefs. Indeed, some Thai academics suggest that devotion to Rama V among middle-class Thais reflects a yearning for a more benevolent, more accessible, more agreeable state.9

That modern, educated Thais seek freedom at the altar rather than at the barricade is perhaps hard to imagine in the contemporary context, where capitalism and material aspirations are deemed to be predominant influences on society. Just as destruction of the environment is considered an inescapable by-product of industrial development, so full engagement with the material world of stock markets and hyper marts is judged to be incompatible with Asian norms of spiritual and moral behaviour. By this material yardstick, Thai investors should not believe that fate governs the stock market, or that a guardian spirit called Phra Siam Thewathirat actually decides who the next prime minister should be. In much the same way that we saw earlier with the political process, the conventional, or ‘global’ view is that tradition makes way for change and transformation—the supplanting of ancient values by modern, usually Western, norms in the interests of economic efficiency and global compatibility. By this reckoning, the affluence of Southeast Asia is setting a course towards a materially-minded society with little time for moral judgement or religious custom.

Here it will be argued that this assumption may be flawed. We shall see in this chapter that religions and their accompanying traditional moral values are experiencing a slow but palpable revival, partly as a response to changing social and economic conditions. More cogently, religion is beginning to play a more conspicuous political role—specifically in the four more developed countries of the region, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. Not, as might be expected, in transforming secular states into theocracies; the cultural diversity of most Southeast Asian societies militates against the imposition of a single creed. ‘To present yourself on a religious platform smacks of extremism and won’t succeed here’, explains a prominent Thai politician.10 There is no foreseeable danger of fundamentalist theocracies evolving in the region. Yet in a more inchoate or benign form, religion can and will be harnessed as a force for moral reform, the assertion of national identity, and perhaps even as a vessel for incubating
indigenous forms of democracy. To quote the same Thai politician, a Muslim:

what will succeed is if you take the values from traditional religion and package them to fit the requirements of modern life.\textsuperscript{11}

SOCIAL CHANGE BREEDS RELIGIOUS REVIVAL

A primary factor reinforcing the role of religion stems from prevailing social conditions. Affluent Asia is beginning to feel the side-effects of growth. Gaps are appearing in society between those who have benefited the most from the new prosperity, and those who, despite the cushioning effects of traditional family structures and relatively low unemployment, now feel excluded from the benefits of development. Standards of living have climbed; but so has the cost of living. The fiscal advantage Asian governments gain by not spending huge sums on welfare must increasingly be weighed against the difficulty of offsetting social and economic disparity.

Even for people in the more affluent Southeast Asian countries who have reaped the benefits of growth, the material gains are sometimes offset by non-material losses. The pace of growth has promoted social and cultural dislocation. The transition to prosperity experienced by educated middle-class members of society has been fast, often occurring within a generation. The changes have highlighted contradictions with custom and family values which they find difficult to resolve. ‘All of a sudden’, says a young Muslim stockbroker in Kuala Lumpur, ‘you go from a situation where family and tradition counted for everything, to becoming an urban yuppie with no time for either.’\textsuperscript{12} In July 1994, a group of leading Thai business figures met to discuss whether the teachings of the Lord Buddha (\textit{dhamma}) conflict with the pursuit of profits. At the seminar, a local CEO bemoaned the fact that as Thailand modernised, graft greed and vice were swamping traditional Thai Buddhist values.\textsuperscript{13} Here is how a prominent Thai artist expressed his view of Thai society:

The world is spinning out of control. The sickness in the world is coming here to Thailand. Money makes you give up
your honesty. We’re working hard for what? To be happy in Hell.\textsuperscript{14}

In the West, this kind of cynicism born of a sense of marginalisation has often resulted in the breakdown of society—a resort to senseless crime at one extreme; high divorce rates and family abuse at the other. To be sure, there is concern about rising crime rates in major cities like Jakarta and Bangkok. The Indonesian weekly news magazine \textit{Tempo} cited a senior Indonesian police officer who predicted that incidents of violence in the city would increase with the widening of economic disparities.\textsuperscript{15} In Singapore the incidence of juvenile crime increased almost 30 per cent between 1992 and 1993. Although stringent policing and controls over personal freedom have generally kept this form of social release within controllable limits, a more interesting phenomenon in urban Southeast Asia is the attraction of the marginalised, or socially insecure, to religion.

Societies which are still bonded by the glue of collective norms and values are likely to fall back on collective action to redress their grievances. In more atomistic Western societies individual action might be considered the best form of escape. Asian societies turn first to the institutions of moral order—to the church, the temple, or mosque—for support. To the socially disenchanted in Buddhist societies the simple contrast between the sacred and the profane is appealing because it sorts out for them what is right and wrong. Submission to faith in Islamic societies can offer relief from the symptoms of social and economic malaise in a similar way because it allows escape into a well-defined moral realm, and an abandonment of this worldly concerns. This need for a moral refuge could help explain why, despite the assumption that religion has been eroded as a force in mainstream politics in the postindependence era, the role of religion as a social force may be growing.

There is some evidence for this. Just as economic exploitation by the British in colonial Burma drove the Buddhist monkhood into political action in the early twentieth century, so the rape of natural resources in contemporary Thailand prompted populist monks like Phra Prajak Kuttajitto to launch an opposition religious movement from his forest temple in north-eastern Thailand’s Buri Ram province in 1990. To stop illegal logging and protect Thailand’s dwindling forestland, he patrolled the forest by
night, and conferred sacred status on individual trees so that no devout Buddhist would dare cut them down.\textsuperscript{16}

In Indonesia, the religious component in political discourse has become more important in the 1990s. Filling a political vacuum left by the emasculation of secular political ideology under Indonesia’s staunchly anti-communist military regime, Muslim intellectuals were able to marry issues of faith to pressing social and economic problems. Recently, some of these intellectuals have blamed liberal financial reforms urged on Indonesia by the World Bank, and implemented by a coterie of Western-trained technocrats, for what they claim is the economic marginalisation of the Indonesian Muslim majority. They are conscious that non-Muslim Chinese Indonesians dominate large areas of the economy and have prospered from state patronage. To redress the situation, they have criticised the Chinese and demanded more official commitment to establishing a fair and equitable Islamic society.

That ethnic and religious divisions in society have become more pronounced as a result of economic disparities is not a new phenomenon. Historically, religiously inspired political movements in Southeast Asia thrived on social deprivation. Often these movements stemmed from attempts to reconcile traditional religious law or custom to new conditions. The inability to do this, generated the urge to purify and reject all alien influences. What began as a desire to explain social and economic change, ended up as a puritanical movement rejecting the political status quo and the outside world. Hence the belief by some puritanical Indonesian Muslims that the government’s family planning programme is a Christian plot to reduce the number of Muslims. Usually, such movements, like the Buddhist Say a San rebellion which erupted in Burma in 1930, found expression in millennial prophecies that periods of disorder would be followed by the appearance of a just leader who would restore harmony to society.

The important nexus here is between religion and nationalism. The dividing line between ‘church’ and ‘state’ in Southeast Asia is thin because most of the ruling elites continue to draw a portion of their legitimacy, at least, from the patronage of religion. Among the dominant Muslim Malay elite in Malaysia, there is scarcely any distinction between the secular and religious realm because being a practising Muslim is an important part of Malay ethnic identity. By not fully divorcing religion from the arena of power, religion
can, unless continually co-opted, become a powerful weapon against the state. Given the tenacity of religion in contemporary Southeast Asian societies, politicians will find themselves treading a narrow path between identifying with and fending off religious extremism.

The difficulty for politicians is knowing where the danger lies. Some of these religious movements are more benign than aggressive; a product of material success and security reflecting a desire of the middle classes to validate their new, more prosperous way of life using traditional values. The popular Phra Dhammakaya Buddhist sect in Thailand is a good example. It draws middle-class support for a ritual-oriented approach to Buddhism. The more ascetic Santi Asoke sect, however, has made the leap into the political arena by supporting a political party. As much as the politicians have manipulated tradition to justify their power, they must be wary of the way tradition can be turned on them. If radical political movements drawing on external ideologies and non-governmental pressure have failed to address social concerns, indigenous religious movements are stepping into the breach. Their appeal stems from a blend of spiritual and nationalistic sentiments. The progress-oriented appeal of entrenched ruling elites has faded as the economic progress they fostered also bred corruption, greed and inequality. Their pragmatic policies encouraged foreign investment and a liberal trade regime, but to some extent left indigenous interests behind.

In Malaysia, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad’s idealistic desire (expressed in his twin tracts, The Malay Dilemma and the Challenge) for the Muslim Malays to spearhead the country’s industrial take-off evidently ran into the problem of finding capable, hard-working Malays. So he turned to non-Malay achievers and foreigners who could get things done. Similarly, Indonesia’s President Suharto found the path to industrial development much smoother when he relied on a small coterie of cronies (many of them Chinese) who, in return for government protection of their trade monopolies, were glad to pour their capital into showcase industrial schemes. The economy was opened up to foreign investors and exchange controls were lifted. However, by trading nationalism for economic pragmatism, these leaders have generated social resentment or envy and stirred new nationalist forces.
As the fruits of economic growth appeared to become more important to the established elite than its distribution to the people, alternative sources of nationalist appeal framed in a religious context have emerged. In Thailand, Phra Prajak argued that the forest is sacred to Buddhists, and that foreigners were destroying the trees. In Malaysia, conservative religious preachers blame immoral and profane trends in society on ‘Western’ influence. A recent expose on profligate wives in a Malaysian tabloid cited a religious teacher as blaming the men for being too busy, but the idea of being unfaithful as ‘Western’! The American social scientist Mark Jurgensmeyer considers that in many parts of the Muslim world the rise of religious nationalism has its roots in the rejection of Western secular ideas and institutions because these ideas and institutions are held to be accountable for the moral decline within their own societies. It would be exaggerating to assume that a wholesale moral breakdown afflicts any of the societies under consideration here; but it would be naïve to ignore the signs of moral malaise on the horizon in many countries.

Significantly, the new generation of politicians waiting in the wings to assume power are becoming aware of these trends. Asians may now be basking in the sunshine of economic prosperity and dynamism Surin Pitsuwan, a successful Muslim politician from Thailand, reminds us: but he is concerned about the down-trodden and marginalised:

The fundamental issue before us, particularly in Southeast Asia today is how to devise a political mechanism, or structure... to bring in the minorities, the marginalised, the forgotten and those who are left behind. Failure to do that will render our economic miracle meaningless and our achievement futile, and leave our stability and prosperity undermined.

The rhetoric is consistent with the term ‘sustainable development’ used by younger generation politicians in Malaysia. Sustainable development essentially means modifying the growth-oriented model employed for the past two decades by factoring in non-economic welfare and social development issues. Looking over the horizon, beyond the period of high growth, means looking beyond economics Malaysia’s Anwar Ibrahim argues. In his view, ‘the
present generation of leaders is obsessed with economics’. To find an ideological basis for a sustainable society, indigenous religious values are being reexamined with a view to harnessing them to the development of a more equitable and, yes, a more democratic society.

If society is turning to religion to address social needs, the politicians are finding ways to exploit the new moral mood to safeguard their power. The need for compassion and spiritual nourishment also dovetails neatly with the broad ideological challenge facing the new generation of political leaders. For strong government and a modified essence of democracy to prevail in Southeast Asia, political elites need to draw on some form of ideology distinguishable from the West. To sustain a political framework within indigenous cultural parameters, to cope with new social and economic challenges and to resist external pressure for change, something stronger and more relevant than tired appeals to the old rhetoric of neo-colonialism may be needed. One approach has been to invoke woolly definitions of traditional Asian culture. Surin Pitsuwan suggests that the indigenous ‘virtues’ of ‘rationality, tolerance and moderation’, are the building blocks of Asian political culture. Anwar Ibrahim talks about tolerance born of ‘multiculturism’ as the key to the consensus-building tradition of Asian societies.

What these younger generation leaders seem to be searching for is a new vocabulary of political thinking. Their need is two-fold. On the one hand they must justify the powerful state mechanism they will shortly inherit from the older generation. On the other they must also address a new set of problems facing society. Of course, whether they are assuming the moral high ground in the search for solutions or simply co-opting the social and political forces mobilised by these problems remains to be seen.

Clearly issues of social justice and morality are fast replacing the old basic concerns of welfare and development in the more developed states of Southeast Asia. In the modern Thai political context it is not enough for a politician to promise factories with jobs, or health clinics to serve the workers: he must also be concerned with conditions in the factory environment; the quality of urban life—principally the traffic woes of urban Bangkok; and stemming corruption. The head of Thailand’s narcotics control board is a kindly old police general who is concerned that some form of drug abuse afflicts 40 per cent of Thailand’s 70,000
communities. ‘What’s the point of 8 per cent growth if our society looks like this?’ he asks.22 In Indonesia, people who now have a basic education and jobs and decent healthcare, want a fairer wage and a more equitable distribution of opportunities. And, as a spate of strikes in Indonesia’s industrial cities suggests, they are now willing to confront the authorities with their demands. In Malaysia, labour conditions are made more tolerable by the full employment situation. All the same, there is concern in government circles that class differences will replace ethnic cleavages as the new fault lines of social conflict. ‘As we progress, our survival must be reflected by our capacity to care for the others’, warns Anwar Ibrahim.23

Anwar’s message carries a moral subtext which suggests that the new politics of Southeast Asia will be coloured by more complex social concerns—which should come as no surprise. Younger generation leaders like Anwar are well-placed to exploit this vein. Anwar is noteworthy in this respect, as he is among the first of his generation to reach a position of power (he was elevated to the position of Deputy Prime Minister in December 1993). Anwar began his political career as leader of Malaysia’s Muslim Youth Movement (ABIM). Although initially drawn to the radical anti-establishment thinking of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s, he was later co-opted by the ruling UMNO party, which attracted him to the more benign Islamic activism of the Sudanese Muslim leader Hassan Tourabi.24

In 1990, residents of Bangkok elected as their Governor a former army general who eats only one meal a day, is a vegetarian, has taken a vow of celibacy, and donates his salary to charity. Major General Chamlong Srimuang’s political party is called the Palang Dharma (Moral Force). In some of his writings, he advocates a system of government ‘which rests upon an enlightened dictator, a moral leader who follows the dasarajadhamma, or ten Buddhist principles of moral leadership’.25 According to the Thai scholar Likhit Dhiravegin, Chamlong represents ‘a combination of Dhamma (morality) and politics, two elements which hardly mix well—but they are substitutes for ideology and politics, the pair which is absent from the Thai political context’.26 Chamlong later traded his role as Governor for a seat in parliament, where his moralistic approach proved no match for Thailand’s machine politics. Facing up to his limitations as a politician, in 1995 Chamlong handed over the party leadership to Thaksin Shinawatra, the telecommunications
tycoon. The contrast in personal wealth and lifestyles could not be greater. Thaksin, who expanded his original computer sales contract with government departments into a monopolistic concession on satellite and cellular phone communications, is a billionaire in any currency. Yet Chamlong insists that both he and Thaksin share the same ‘moral platform’.27

Politicians like Anwar and Chamlong need to reconcile their moralistic message with the corporate interests that are an important facet of patronage politics in Southeast Asia. But by conveying their message using the idiom of religion, they are none the less tapping into a growing constituency. Rather like the unexpected success of the Green movement in Europe at the end of the 1970s, it might not be prudent to dismiss their approach to acquiring and sustaining their power. Chamlong has already served as deputy prime minister, and Anwar is considered the man most likely to succeed Mahathir as prime minister of Malaysia.

Earlier we saw how political development in Southeast Asian states involved the adaptation and reassertion of precolonial or traditional models of leadership and authority—but found that these models accommodated or assimilated more modern influences. If one of the most arresting broader social trends has been the reassertion of traditional religious ritual and belief, does this also mean that society will show the same adaptive flexibility? What happens when neo-traditional models of power combine with reinforced primordial spiritual and religious beliefs? Where does this leave the forces of modernisation? Playing a conspicuous, yet by no means exclusive, role in this development has been Islam, the religion of some 200 million Southeast Asians—about half the region’s population.

**ISLAMIC REVIVAL IN INDONESIA**

To say that Southeast Asia is experiencing a resurgence of Islam has become almost a cliché. Until recently, few purveyors of this generalisation deviated from the view that the driving force of this Islamic revival was the 1979 Iranian revolution and the consequent diffusion of Islamic militancy. Shortly after the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran shocked the Western world with his militant resolve the West Indian writer V.S. Naipaul arrived in Malaysia in search of these same religious passions. He wrote of Muslim missionaries spreading militancy among the Malays and of
a new Islam which preached ‘that the Islamic state will come later—as in Iran, as in Pakistan’. At the time, Naipaul and others were perhaps understandably persuaded that what happened in Iran could spread to other parts of the Islamic world. They had it only fractionally right.

The truth is that Islam is reasserting itself and is becoming a more important social and political force in the Muslim countries of Southeast Asia. But visions of an incipient radical theocracy are misplaced. To begin with, to regard all Islamic movements as theocratic in nature is to overestimate the power and role of the clergy. Even in Iran, since the revolution the tendency has been towards the marginalisation of the radical clergy and towards formulating a more rational Islamic state. In the Southeast Asian context, the political elite has traditionally been allergic to enhancing the role of the religious scholars, or ulama, for the simple reason that the ulama’s influence on the grass roots of society has always been strong—and thus poses a threat to the authority of the state.

It is also misleading to assume that Islamic thought in the region is wholly nurtured by an invisible umbilical cord stretching westward to the Middle East or the sub-continent. Islam came to Southeast Asia with a universal message which helped it to overcome resistance from existing parochial beliefs. But the religion also has a long and autonomous history in the region. Islam played an important role in the early commercial development of Southeast Asia from the thirteenth century—even before the Europeans arrived. Much later, modernist Islamic thought contributed in no small way to the growth of nationalist movements during the colonial era. In the course of history Islam has adapted to local cultural conditions: so much so that a Muslim Malaysian minister, Anwar Ibrahim, felt he could safely say that his country had more in common with Buddhist Thailand than with Muslim Saudi Arabia. A former Indonesian religious affairs minister, Munawir Sjadzali, went so far as to suggest a reinterpretation of Islamic shariah law more suited to the local Asian context. Imported interpretations and dogma are important; but local customs and traditions have also influenced the development of Islam. Today, in the two mainly Islamic countries, Malaysia and Indonesia, Islam is resurgent primarily because of rapid changes in society. It is far more likely that they will become definably Islamic societies, rather than Islamic states.
Islamic revival in Southeast Asia does not fit the misleading popular stereotype of Islamic fundamentalism as a refuge for the rural poor and uneducated. In Indonesia the revival of Islamic devotion in the 1980s and 1990s has been a largely urban and middle-class phenomenon—the segment of society most affected by social and economic change. Partly this phenomenon can be attributed to the increasing number of Muslim devotees who are joining the ranks of the urban middle class. But a more important factor has been the social dislocation which plagues any fast-growing urban society. Many people have strengthened their faith as a reaction to the flagrant disregard for traditional moral values they see around them. In late 1990, the noted Indonesian historian Kuntowidjoyo suggested that the hedonism and immorality spreading through urban society has been mirrored by a move towards moral renewal.\textsuperscript{29}

In contemporary Jakarta, neither the roar of rush-hour traffic, which never seems to subside, nor the pounding of construction pile-drivers which never seems to stop, can drown the lyrical call to Muslim prayer. The urban mosque acts as a refuge from the insecurity of urban existence. Indonesia’s fairly consistent growth rate, averaging almost 7 per cent in the 1990s, has created a more vertically stratified society. There have been winners and losers. In urban areas, the economic contrasts are more sharply etched, and large numbers of Indonesians feel they have not benefited from the growth in the economy. In the absence of organised welfare programmes and without the family support offered by the extended village clan, those who are less well-off and frustrated have only the mosque to turn to. For the younger generation, the resort to religion is aided by the compulsory religious education they have received since the 1970s. They also have more and more mosques to flock to, thanks to a government-backed drive to build them. The provision of \textit{musholla}, or prayer rooms, in modern office buildings is, for instance, a relatively recent development.

The reassertion of Islamic belief is not entirely a reaction to economic stress. Religiosity in urban Indonesia is also becoming rather chic. ‘Formerly, Islam was associated with backwardness and poverty and modern Muslims tended to be a bit ashamed of their Islamic identity’, notes Indonesian Muslim intellectual Dewi Anwar. But with economic and career success, she explains: ‘Islam is no longer seen as the religion of losers.’\textsuperscript{30} Fashion-conscious Indonesians can now shop for up-market Islamic garb, or send
their kids to exclusive Islamic kindergarten schools. Islamically influenced popular music, called *dangdut*, is one of the more profitable areas of Indonesia’s multifaceted music industry.

Aside from the social conditions inducing more interest in religion, there are also more divisive forces at work in Indonesian society. In 1974 the Dutch scholar W.F. Wertheim wrote:

> discontent among the great majority of Muslims is likely to mount. They increasingly resent a military regime which has sold out its riches to foreign capitalists who dominate the Indonesian economy as they did in the colonial period. They also resent the economic advantages enjoyed by Christian communities that receive financial help from the Western world.\(^{31}\)

A decade later the latent uneasiness between Muslims and the state observed by Wertheim exploded when scores of people fell in a hail of army bullets outside a mosque in the Tanjung Priok area of Jakarta. The army has always said it was forced to fire on the crowd in self-defence. Muslim and human rights activists maintain that the army provoked the incident to justify cracking down on Muslim activists.\(^{32}\) Another ten years on, Muslim activists were still waiting out the end of the Suharto era and hoping that his successor would foster a more Islamic society in Indonesia. Despite their majority status and all the patronage granted by the state, strong feelings of political discontent exist among Indonesian Muslims, a phenomenon which can be traced to the decision by the Republic’s founding fathers not to define the state in Islamic terms.

When Indonesian nationalists were drafting their first constitution in the early months of 1945, Islamic leaders wanted to stipulate that Muslims should adhere to the *shariah* law and that the head of state should always be a Muslim. This would have defined Indonesia as an Islamic state, which seemed logical enough in a country where 90 per cent of the population professed Islam. But the Islamic lobby met with resistance from secular nationalists who were mainly drawn from less devout segments of Indonesian society, and were concerned that predominantly Christian Eastern Indonesia (which also had deeper roots in Dutch colonial society) would opt out of the planned unitary republic. Rightly or wrongly their perception was that Indonesia defined as an Islamic state
would breed intolerance. The formula adopted in the final draft, proclaimed in August 1945, fell well short of meeting the Islamic lobby’s demands. Yet, by stating that every Indonesian should believe in God (ketuhanan maha esa), the drafters established Indonesia as a religious state which tolerated all religions. The compromise ensured religious tolerance and harmony for Indonesian society, but set some Islamic leaders firmly and irrevocably against the government.

The state defused this potential threat to its authority by banning the most effective Muslim political party, Masyumi, and demanding that all religious groups subscribe to the state ideology of Pancasila. The move to proscribe Islamic political expression must be set against a rash of regional revolts from the late 1940s until the late 1950s that opposed the central government in the name of Islam. At the 1955 general election, considered one of the freest ever held in Indonesian history, the Muslim parties garnered 45 per cent of the vote. Ironically, political emasculation did not prevent the growth of Islamic consciousness in other ways. In fact, by shutting the door on Islam in the political arena the state helped lay the foundation for the religious revival currently underway in Indonesia. It was once fashionable to talk about the majority of Indonesia’s Muslims as ‘statistical Muslims’ —anthropologists distinguished between santri or devout Muslims and abangan, mainly Javanese who tended to be Muslim in name only. But today the distinction seems to be fading, as more and more Indonesian Muslims have found their faith relevant to the challenges of survival.

This new-found relevance of faith is the product of new forms of Islamic teaching. Cut off from politics from the 1970s, Muslim intellectuals were forced to dress up religious teaching in a benign form which allayed official suspicions. This meant dropping all references to Islamic statehood and de-emphasising literal adherence to Islamic law. Instead, they focused their energies on making Islam more relevant and appealing to the masses. They applied Islamic ideas to the changing nature of society, addressing the stresses and strains produced by rapid economic growth. By spurning any active role in politics after 1984, and becoming instead a non-governmental organisation addressing mainly the social and economic concerns of its members, Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia’s largest Muslim organisation with some 30 million members evaded state harassment and built valuable bridges to the
armed forces (which offered valuable protection when the organisation’s leadership became involved in the democracy movement).

Traditionally opposed to the dogmatic political approach once favoured by Masyumi, NU was regarded as more benign by the government. Rejecting literal interpretations of religious dogma not only helped foster better relations with the state but broadened the appeal of Islam and appeased an ever nervous non-Muslim minority. The emphasis placed on moral and ethical behaviour rather than outward piety offered a model of Islam that was more acceptable to non-Muslims. This more pluralistic Islamic thinking also embraced universal concepts of tolerance, egalitarianism and democracy, which laid the foundations for Islamic thinkers to play a role in the democratisation debate of the 1990s. NU’s leader, Abdurrahman Wahid was a co-founder of the ‘Forum Demokrasi’ established in 1991.

Being more acceptable to the state allowed the new generation of Islamic intellectuals to operate moderate Islamic organisations and educational institutions which attracted government support and patronage. Being able to work among the urban middle class and on university campuses, where overt political activity has been banned since the late 1970s, helped garner support and foster a wider acceptance of Islam. Thus, Islamic movements which adapted successfully to the harsher political environment under Suharto’s New Order were in a position to satisfy the spiritual and ethical needs of the middle class just as those needs became greater. Today, contemporary Muslim intellectuals, like Nurcholis Madjid, are satisfied that what looked like a sell-out to the government in fact allowed the incubation of a more far-reaching and meaningful Islamic movement:

We have much greater freedom to interpret our religion and equate it to the demands of modernity without being apologetic.33

There is a danger that this more moderate, cultural expression of Islam fostered by modernist intellectuals can be hijacked by those who still harbour political grudges from the past. And there are signs in Indonesia that religious revival ignited by social and economic conditions is assuming political significance. There are more politically minded Muslims who perceive the Suharto
government as a military regime which has relied too heavily on foreign capitalists and Western aid, and there is simmering resentment of Chinese and Christian economic dominance. ‘The Islamic community is not poor because it is lazy’, remarked a Muslim intellectual in 1991, ‘it is lazy because it is poor.’

Many Muslims are convinced that the economic development and modernisation of Indonesia has marginalised the Muslim community, who comprise the majority, and enfranchised a foreign minority, the Chinese. The Chinese comprise only 4 per cent of the population, but by some estimates have cornered a third of the wealth. Some of these activists consider that the New Order regime consciously promoted non-Muslim business interests to weaken any potential Muslim power base. According to Nurcholis Madjid, their view is that: ‘The army did not want to cooperate with indigenous entrepreneurs because that would mean drawing close to Masyumi, their political enemies.’

Given the glaring social and economic inequalities of contemporary Indonesia, and the history of official attitudes towards Islam as a political force, many Muslims can be persuaded that the New Order is fundamentally opposed to promoting distinctly Muslim interests. Some elements of the Muslim community feel economically as well as politically alienated. So, while social change has acted as the catalyst to Islamic revival, the politicisation of Islam has fed on the climate of social envy. What worries the government is the congruence of Islamic aspirations with anti-establishment sentiment. This explains why Suharto thought it necessary to bring Muslim activists under his wing with the formation of the Islamic Intellectual Organisation (ICMI) in December 1990.

‘Muslim aspirations are secondary in this organisation; the first priority is to ensure the stability of the nation’, remarked one of Suharto’s aides ahead of ICMI’s December 1990 inaugural meeting in the bucolic atmosphere of Malang in East Java. Suharto may have intended ICMI to serve as a political prop, but to the horror of non-Muslims and the dogma-shy army the organisation accelerated the revival of Islamic consciousness and reopened the political arena to Muslim activists. The opportunity Suharto handed them was indeed tempting. After 20 years of banishment to the political periphery, here they were being asked to dine at the head table. More radical activists like Amien Rais, a political scientist from Gaja Madah University in Jogyakarta, saw it as an
opportunity to be seized: ‘For so long we Muslims have been relatively deprived in economic and political terms; we can’t even preach in a mosque without obtaining a licence from the government’ It would not be long, he predicted in 1990, before a Masyumi-style Islamic political party would emerge out of ICMI.38

Indeed, by the middle of 1994 it appeared the Muslim factor in politics was well reentrenched, and might even play a role in the succession process. At 72, Suharto was heading into his sixth and, though difficult to predict, possibly last term in office. An increasingly vocal group of Muslim activists saw the transition period as their best shot at establishing a more powerful role for the majority faith. Yet, as with any political grouping in Indonesia, unity was imperfect and a variety of interests were involved. Describing ICMI as a coalition of interests, a senior military officer distinguished between hard-line fundamentalists, Masyumi remnants, and young opportunists who wanted little more than to replace Suharto. He, like many in the establishment, assumed that Indonesia’s very diversity militated against any one of these groups achieving their specific ends. ‘The Muslims talk about being the majority. They forget, it is the Javanese who comprise over 100 million Indonesians who are in fact, the majority’.39

Yet in the search for a new, more open, more democratic style of politics, the Javanese culture—or the way in which it has been harnessed to politics over the past quarter-century—was coming under increasing fire. Culture and religion, rather than ideology were becoming the intellectual tools of the democratisation debate. Liberally educated Muslim Javanese like Adi Sasono believed that Suharto ‘would be the last Javanese to hold power in this country. The new political culture would be tied to the outside world, not the world of feudalism...he will be the last King.’40 Why not? Many educated Indonesians would welcome the modification of a political culture too imbued with paternalistic notions of all powerful patron and humble client.

What would the Javanese feudal culture be replaced with? To many non-Muslims the Javanese culture, for all its feudal ways, also acts as a bulwark against purist notions of Islamic identity: it stands for eclecticism and tolerance. An Indonesia not dominated by Javanese culture, many non-Muslims believed, might also be an Indonesia which defines itself as more Islamic. Suharto may have wanted to co-opt the forces of Islam by patronising ICMI, the new Islamic organisation. There were no signs that he regarded Islam
as a replacement for the Javanese culture that allowed him to wield almost absolute power.

**ISLAMIC BREVKMANSHIP IN MALAYSIA**

To watch old Shaw Brothers Malaysian movies from the mid-1960s is to step back into another world; a world of mini-skirts and beehive hairdos, where the rich amuse themselves dancing the twist and sipping cocktails. Thirty years on, scratchy prints of these old black and white movies still play on Malaysian TV, but the liberal lifestyle they portray is hard to find in contemporary real life. Today, fashions sported by the younger generation vary markedly between the races. Mini-skirts are still worn—by the Chinese. Muslim Malay girls have traded their beehive hairdos and fashion-boots for more modest body length *baju-kurong* and head coverings to convey the sense of modesty dictated by Islamic custom. There are cocktail bars, but it is an offence for a Muslim to be caught drinking alcohol. A Malaysian Rip Van Winkle who fell asleep in 1964 and awoke in 1994 might think that the country had experienced a religious revolution.

There was no religious revolution. There was an ethnic crisis of confidence, in the course of which Islam was harnessed by the politicians to assert the ethnic dominance of the Malays who comprise about half Malaysia’s population. In the process, consciously and sometimes inspite of themselves, Malaysia’s ruling elite helped reinforce religious values and Islamic consciousness, and set the stage for the gradual Islamicisation of the country.

The face of Malaysia had changed irrevocably when people woke up on the morning of 14 May 1969. A clumsy show of hubris by a victorious Chinese-led opposition party the day before, sparked off an orgy of ethnic violence which left scores dead and parts of downtown Kuala Lumpur gutted by fire. In those few hours, the old ‘clubable Malaya’ captured by the British author Anthony Burgess in his Malayan Trilogy more or less died. In its place, there emerged a very different Malaysia: less confident of itself, but determined never to allow the centrifugal forces of ethnic conflict out of the bottle again. In his sensitively observed *Malaysian Journey*, the contemporary Malaysian writer Rehman Rashid recalled that the deepest anguish of that time was the ‘certain knowledge that the entire nation would be made to pay for the unrestrained furies of a few sections of the population, and there
was nothing anyone could do but wait for the axe to fall, and know that nothing would ever be the same again.  

One of the principal changes introduced after May 1969 was an affirmative action programme for the bumiputeras (a broad racial classification encompassing Malays and other indigenous groups of Malaysia). The so-called New Economic Policy set out to endow the Malays with the economic means to match the wealth of the Chinese, who at the time comprised almost 40 per cent of the population. As a mechanism for redistributing equity to the mass of under-privileged bumiputeras the NEP has not been wholly successful. By 1990 the overall bumiputera share of the economy had risen remarkably from 2.4 per cent to 20.3 per cent, but only 14 per cent was held by individuals—the rest by government-organised trust agencies. The policy worked rather better as a reinforcing agent of ethnic identity. For once the Malays were empowered to dominate, they searched for ways to cement that dominance by shoring up their exclusive identity. As well as amassing corporate wealth, one of the most effective methods has been the assertion of their religious identity as Muslims.

An entire generation of Malays raised in the wake of May 1969 were taught never to compromise on matters of religion and language. One of the conditions for Malays joining the civil service is their ability to recite the Koran. Adherence to religious practices, such as fasting during the holy month of Ramadhan, are legally enforced. Younger generation Malays who remember their parents enjoying a liberal lifestyle, could not think of drinking alcohol in public, or taking their fiancée on a weekend jaunt before marriage. Popular hotel resorts are regularly patrolled by the religious authorities to hunt down unmarried couples committing khalwat, or close proximity. In the old Shaw brothers movies the Malay hero might be seen seducing his heroine while bathing in a stream; in contemporary Malaysia, when an actor and actress kiss on stage the morals of society are called into question. As Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad put it: ‘The trend here in Malaysia is towards more religiosity.’

Mahathir’s public view is that the growth of religious devotion in tandem with the prosperity of Malaysians can save the country from moral decay. ‘Affluent people tend to forget God’, he says. ‘Now that there is more awareness and a desire to adhere to religion...we are hopeful that when Malaysians become more affluent they will not forget God.’ Privately though, Malaysia’s
current leaders are concerned about the implications of this assertion of faith. For as well as reinforcing Malay identity and preserving the boundaries of power-sharing in Malaysia’s plural society, a more assertive dogmatic Islam since the 1970s has bred rejection of the material values of commerce and consumerism on which the country’s economy depends.

Having said this, it would be very difficult for any Malay leader to counter this religious trend with overtly secular policies. Because being a Malay is inseparable from being a Muslim, the Malay ruling elite has to tread a very narrow path between embracing Islamic dogma and rejecting its full implications for governing society. Simple distinctions between what is religious and secular are not as easily worked out as they are in the Indonesian context. A Sudanese Muslim theologian teaching at the International Islamic University in Kuala Lumpur argues that the Malaysian example matches no other in the Muslim world. ‘This might be largely due to the interaction between Malayness and religion; more specifically, the profound confusion between Islam and ethnicity in the Malaysian context.’

Religion is a pervasive factor in Malaysian society. This does not mean it is always under control, however. When some of the post-1969 generation of Malays obtained scholarships to study abroad, their sense of separate identity was reinforced by exposure to the revolutionary Islamic ferment of the late 1970s. Rehman Rashid was among them:

> it happened amazingly quickly. Within months of our arrival I was seeing my compatriots only at lectures, watching them don progressively more bizarre attire and steadily lose weight for fear of eating anything tainted by the Unclean.

Radical fringe groups like the Islamic Revolutionary Council that originated in overseas student circles, and Shiite or Messianic movements, found the Malay urban middle class very susceptible to their moral message. The recruiting ground for these fringe groups has been the overseas campus rather than the village mosque. When Malaysian Muslim students arrive at US or British campuses, they are met by representatives of organised Muslim groups and offered what they need most: a cultural refuge. Far from home, and probably overseas for the first time, they find the offer hard to refuse. Over the course of their studies, these
impressionable new converts are taught the value of sticking together as a religious community against a backdrop of the decadent morally bankrupt society their teachers want them to reject.

Once home in Malaysia, armed with their degrees, these young Malay graduates join the ranks of the civil service or head into the professions, business or politics. Their exposure to Islamic fundamentalist dogma has traditionally not drawn them to PAS, the mainstream Malaysian Islamic party. PAS is a mainly rural-based party, with large concentrations of traditional support in the Malay heartlands of the northern and eastern peninsular states. From a religious perspective, PAS adheres to the same rigid Sunni orthodoxy followed by the government. ‘PAS is not a subversive movement that wants to destroy the country’s institutions’, said its leader Fadyl Noor in July 1992: ‘PAS stands within the political system and only wants to replace the government.’ Government sources now acknowledge, however, that PAS has been picking up support in urban middle-class areas. In the April 1995 general election the opposition to Mahathir’s National front was generally emasculated at the polls. PAS managed to increase its share of the popular vote from 6 per cent to 7 per cent and maintain the same number of seats in parliament.

It is not inconceivable that if PAS ever came to power in Malaysia they would behave much like the current ruling Malay elite, deploying a moderate Islamic agenda to shore up their legitimacy. The defeated UMNO, might in turn adopt the Islamic struggle to attack PAS. However, the success of Islamic fringe groups in urban middle-class areas over the past two decades cannot be attributed to a competition for power. It appears to feed off a genuine desire for a more Islamic society. Take these extracts from a pamphlet aimed at civil servants and businessmen, which detected public concern about ‘the insufficiency of relying mainly on a legal system which separates morality from the law’; or ‘the insufficiency of relying on codes of ethics which are mainly derived from and appeal to human reason alone, leaving the seat of conscience and deep spiritual motivations which are connected to accountability to the supreme being’.

From here it is perhaps a short step to asking more fundamental questions. If our government claims to follow an Islamic agenda, how is it that its leaders are so corrupt? What is the answer? A moral cleansing of government? In Indonesia, the question is put
somewhat differently: if Muslims constitute a majority, why aren’t their aspirations better represented? What is the answer? Mobilise Muslim support for political change?

From this brief consideration of religious movements in Indonesia and Malaysia, it should be apparent that religion is becoming more rather than less important—both in society and as a political factor—inspite of the march of modern, capitalist, material progress. Modernisation and progress have not, as some might predict, replaced God with Mammon. Quite the reverse: progress has reinforced, revived and reinvigorated traditional patterns of religious identity and spiritual devotion. Economic disparities and the social upheaval brought about by rapid economic growth laid the foundations of this spiritual revival; political competition and polarisation have helped push it along. Now, apply this phenomenon to the search for alternative sources of political energy with wider social appeal, and religion could conceivably offer an unsullied moral vision—and in some cases a course of political action refreshingly different from existing Western models. But will Southeast Asia’s Muslim states follow the examples of Iran, Algeria, or the Sudan? Will religious nationalism become a force for political change?

**ISLAM AND NATIONALISM**

Marzuki Darusman, the vice-chairman of Indonesia’s Human Rights Commission, is a former MP with considerable political experience in the country’s pro-government ‘Golkar’ party. His establishment background has imbued him with a measure of suspicion when it comes to Muslim activists in politics—even though he is a Muslim himself. ‘The transition from striving for an Islamic state to establishing an Islamic society has put a lot of people at ease’, he suggests. ‘But what’s the distinction between state and society? Surely it ends up with the same objective of setting up a Muslim polity?’

Marzuki, like many educated Indonesians, rejects the notion that the country could become any more Islamic than it already is. Defining the state, even society for that matter, as exclusively Islamic would, in their view, tear the country’s multiracial and multireligious society apart.

Talking to some members of the Malaysian establishment elicits a similar response: there is a limit to how far institutionalising Islam can go before it rubs up against other elements in Malaysia’s
plural society. Thus while Mahathir may publicly welcome the increasing trend towards what he calls ‘religiosity’, he has harnessed the bureaucracy in an effort to breed a more tolerant strain of Islam. In 1992 the government set up an institution called the Institute of Islamic Understanding (IKIM). IKIM is a fine example of bureaucratic bypass surgery. Originally, the religious affairs department in the Prime Minister’s office was tasked with promoting a more open, tolerant, and less conservative brand of Islam. Instead, the officials themselves became more conservative. IKIM holds seminars where Malaysians of all faiths are encouraged to learn just how tolerant Islam really is.

In Indonesia and Malaysia, official propagation of a benign, tolerant Islam comes into direct conflict with scriptural purist interpretations of the faith which rejects the secular or worldly. The frustration for someone like Mahathir in Malaysia is that while he urges his fellow Muslims to consider their faith as receptive to modernity and all sources of knowledge—often harping on the Muslim scientists of the Alhambra in medieval Spain and their influence on the European Renaissance—the religious scholars in their pondok (a rural religious school) still treat the non-Islamic world as unpure, and therefore something to be rejected.

In Indonesia, the conflict between open and more closed treatments of Islam highlights the dangers of breeding intolerance. Marzuki Darusman points to the impact that stricter definitions of Muslim identity are already having on Indonesian society. Take the increasing number of urban Muslims using Islamic greetings (which sets them apart from their non-Muslim fellow citizens), a crackdown by the authorities on drinking or an edict from the Indonesian Council of Ulama in 1993 reminding Muslims that it is haram to celebrate Christmas with their Christian neighbours. All these changes can be seen as the assertion of Muslim faith. They can also be read by the non-Muslim minority as signs of creeping intolerance in Indonesian society.

At the other extreme, there is the rhetoric of prominent Muslim scholars like Abdurrahman Wahid or Nurcholis Madjid who argue that Islam in its Indonesian context must strive to be an inclusive faith: accepting the ways of non-Muslims as well as trying to broaden the acceptance of Islam. ‘It would be beneficial if Islamic values can cater and broaden to apply to non-Muslims, which would contribute to national identity’, Abdurrahman Wahid
argues. Nurcholis goes so far as to praise the ethics of honesty, thrift and hard work which are characterised as rooted in ‘White Anglo-Saxon Protestant’ culture. ‘These values are not exclusively Christian’, he contends: ‘If generalised enough, they are shared by people of all faiths.’

But these arguments for tolerance, and even cultural cross-fertilisation, run up against the role of Islam as a driving force of early twentieth-century nationalism in both Indonesia and what was then Malaya. As Harry Benda noted in the case of Indonesia:

Islam came to serve Indonesians as a rallying point of identity, to symbolise separateness from, and opposition to, foreign, Christian overlords.

Islam could serve as a focus of identity and nationalist aspiration because of three contrasting approaches to the relationship between religion and politics. In secular terms there was the precolonial tradition of the Muslim community ruled by a Muslim King or ‘Raja’. In modern terms there was the influence of Islamic modernist movements which, from the early twentieth century, attempted to rationalise the assimilation of modern Western knowledge and Islamic doctrine. Finally there was the more exclusive and dogmatic view that Muslims should live in an Islamic state governed by Islamic customs and laws. For Muslims in Southeast Asia the Islamic state has always been one of the most contentious issues since independence.

Even though an Islamic state would seem to be the most logical product of marrying Islam to politics, neither Indonesia nor Malaysia have become truly Islamic states. Both countries harbour an intriguing historical paradox. Although led by governments claiming to patronise Islam, Islamic opposition movements struggle to establish Islamic states. Given this allergy to theocracy by those in power, it seems unlikely that either Indonesia or Malaysia will fall victim to extreme forms of religious nationalism. The intellectual consensus is that the reality of plural societies and traditions of tolerance will never allow one religious creed to smother another. As Nurcholis Madjid puts it; the nomenclature of Islamic politics is derived from the Arab hearth of Islam, but the social context is purely Asian.

That is not to say that Islam and religion in general won’t play a political role. The Islamic revival underway in Indonesia, and to
some extent in Malaysia, inevitably rejects the notion that somehow Asian Muslims are less devout than their Arab co-religionists. The new mood of spirituality embraces the view that Asian Muslims can be more religious in the spiritual and ethical sense than Muslims in other parts of the world. This suggests that religion has the potential to be an important component of the new politics of Southeast Asia. ‘Spirituality will be harnessed as a form of quality control in business and politics’, as Malaysian commentator Syed Adam Al Jaffri puts it. What the new generation of Muslim leaders like Anwar Ibrahim say they want to do is work towards an Islamic society that is both morally correct in the doctrinal realm, advanced in the more secular fields of economics and technology, and fully adapted to the region’s traditions of pluralism and tolerance.

Whilst drawing intellectually on the Islamic modernism of the earlier twentieth century, this approach falls well short of the more radical ideas of the Muslim brotherhood in Egypt and its related movement in South Asia. Opposed to a dogmatic interpretation of Islamic tradition, the new generation of Islamic activists in Southeast Asia instead would prefer to follow the established practice of *ijtihad* (the right to interpret Islam in the light of modern conditions) so long as the outcome is consistent with the essential message of Islam. Its adherents would see the new Islamic thinking as, above all, indigenously derived. Elements of this new Islamic order would include: the adaptation of Islamic principles of finance and business to the modern context; more interaction between Muslims in the region; and—perhaps most challenging of all—the definition of democracy in an Islamic, and therefore implicitly non-Western context.

The role of religion in the modern nationalist context is more likely to be contextual rather than dogmatic. But this should not diminish the importance of religion as a determining factor in the future shape of political and social institutions. Ironically, perhaps, it is precisely this ambiguous role of religion in the definition of the state that allows religious beliefs to play a core role in the political culture. Unlike Europe, Southeast Asian states never divorced the church from the state—instead they co-opted the church. As Nurcholis Madjid points out: ‘In Indonesia, Islam is not the religion of the state, so we have much greater freedom to interpret our religion and equate it to the demands of modernity, without having to be apologetic.’
Chapter 6
Coming together

Wherever one journeys in the region, one comes upon the same towns and villages on plains besides lakes and rivers, surrounded by the same clusters of bamboo, bananas, and other fruit trees,

Jose T. Almonte, ‘Towards One Southeast Asia’

Project for Ecological recovery is a Thai non-governmental organisation dedicated to monitoring the impact of development on the environment. Protecting Thailand’s environment from the onslaught of commerce has been hard enough for PER’s energetic director Witoon Perpongscharoen, as the maps on the wall of his spartan shophouse office in downtown Bangkok testify. In a variety of disarmingly soft colours, they depict the rape of Thailand’s forests, the erosion of its watersheds, and the diversion of its natural rivers. The colourful maps also show something else: the spread of ecological damage across Thailand’s borders into neighbouring Burma, Laos and Cambodia. Commercial logging has been banned in Thailand since 1989, largely because of persistent campaigning by organisations such as PER.

The success of environmental pressure groups in Thailand has hastened the environmental exploitation of neighbouring countries, however. Unable to log over forests in Thailand, up to 50 private logging firms went to Burma instead. Witoon traces a finger along the red-shaded areas inside the 800 km long Burmese border with Thailand where valuable teak forests are fast disappearing. ‘Even though this is Burma’, he says, ‘we feel we must take some responsibility for what is happening there’.1

Witoon’s concern about the environment in neighbouring countries points to a new and potentially important factor
governing the political landscape of Southeast Asia. What happens when the countries of the region become more concerned about what goes on across their borders? Greater regional integration of the ten countries in Southeast Asia is inevitable. If not by means of institutionalised regionalism, then through enhanced travel and migratory flows, the media and transnational investment by the private sector. There is even an ambitious proposal to foster a regional community bound by common social and cultural ties. A kind of regional council has been suggested to provide a forum for grass roots groups to discuss common concerns for consideration at a state level.²

Will such cooperative behaviour, beyond existing diplomatic and economic planes, force authoritarian regimes to relax their grip because the victims of oppression can turn to their neighbours for help? Or will closer contacts between countries with shared or similar political cultures only serve to reinforce the political status quo? The case of Burma suggests that reality cuts both ways. Pro-democracy students fleeing the uprising of May 1988 sought refuge in neighbouring Thailand, where they found a platform for their grievances. Not long afterwards, Burma’s military rulers were being offered advice by their military colleagues in Thailand and Indonesia about how best to prolong their grip on power.

One of the least discussed aspects of Southeast Asia’s political development is how it will be affected by the fostering of closer regional ties. Contact between Southeast Asian states is forging common endeavours and a striving for common identity in a region once composed of diverse states with conflicting interests. On an official level, contact is being encouraged by the increasing intensity of multilateral cooperation in the region. Everything from security to library science now has its own regional forum. The region’s successful entrepreneurs are also casting around for intraregional investment: telecoms companies in Thailand are looking to lucrative untapped markets in Indonesia and the Philippines; Singaporean investors are spreading their wings to Burma and Vietnam; and Malaysians are nurturing a friendly trade relationship with Cambodia. Satellite broadcasting and telecommunications technology means that people in Laos and Cambodia now watch Thai television; Indonesians receive and watch Malaysian television, and even programmes beamed from China.
Personal contacts blossomed in the 1990s as prosperity increased people’s ability to travel. Asians accounted for almost 60 per cent of visitors to other Asia Pacific Countries in 1993. By the mid-1990s, middle-class professionals from the four more developed ASEAN countries were so prone to travelling overseas that their governments started promoting domestic tourism to entice them back. This rapid development of intraregional contact not only has implications for established perceptions of security and nationalism but also lends a new dimension to the study of political change.

A few years ago a Thai such as Witoon citing concern about a neighbouring country would have sounded incredible. A decade or so ago, even talking about a distant town or village invoked unfamiliar, cool, even alien sentiments. Before advancing prosperity allowed the citizens of Southeast Asia to travel to one another’s countries, the average citizen was hardly worldly-wise. People were by and large suspicious of their neighbours. In 1982, poor slum dwellers in the city of Chiangmai told the author that they were reluctant to take a ten minute bicycle ride to the central market because it was too far from their ‘village’. In spite of the tropical climate, they felt ‘warmer’ at home; outside the bounds of their village, they ‘felt cold’. More remarkably, these psychological feelings of insecurity explained why slum dwellers endured a 5 or 10 per cent mark-up on goods brought to their village store by a local merchant. In 1995 a resident of the same slum area had already made the 500 mile journey to Bangkok in search of work, and would consider doing so again.

Traditionally, communities in Southeast Asia have been inward looking. Paradoxically, for a region populated by migrants and criss-crossed by trade routes, its people have (with a few notable exceptions like the Buginese, the Minangkabau of West Sumatra, or the Kelantanese of Malaysia) developed a remarkably sedentary culture. The fostering of close ties with land and place is rooted in intensive rice cultivation. Rice cultivation is an absorbing form of agriculture, requiring a high input of man-hours and complex organisation. Both requirements helped develop strong communal bonds. An individual leaving the village could upset a family’s subsistence regime. Similarly, outsiders coming in would find water, land and labour scarce commodities. Beyond the rice-fields lay the untamed forest, a marginal territory perceived as dark and inhospitable. Local folklore taught that bad spirits lived in the
trees and hills rimming the rice-fields, keeping people in and
discouraging all but the most adventurous to wander far—as did
the need to tend the spirits of deceased kin.

This attachment to place translated on the national plane into
suspicion about the outer world and a particular fear of the
chaotic margins separating one world from another. This does not
mean there was never any contact between these parochial worlds.
Trade was usually in the hands of outsiders, who as a result became
the agents of cultural change as well as commerce. Reflecting the
important conductive power of trade, early missionaries travelled
with merchants. Trade was therefore much more than a simple
medium of commerce: trade was a medium of cultural change.

At times the threat of invasion and warfare was as pervasive as
that which gripped the continent of Europe in the middle ages.
Often the ravages of war were as drastic: whole towns were
levelled, and rice fields were destroyed. Visit the devastated ruins of
the former Thai capital of Ayudhya, or the sacked Burmese capital
of Ava on the outskirts of Mandalay to judge just how effectively
the victors trod on the vanquished. At the Tat Luang temple in the
centre of the Lao capital of Vientiane, a pile of broken Buddha
images is kept on display to remind Lao people of the severity of
the last Thai invasion in the nineteenth century.

Yet, the cost in human terms was less compared with the
barbarity which prevailed in Europe. The object of warfare in this
region was to capture manpower, not—at least until the rise of the
Khmer Rouge in Cambodia—to extinguish life. Calamity in one
country was considered serendipity by its neighbour—an
opportunity to acquire resources. There was often quite intense
rivalry between one petty state and another. This kind of
sentiment lives on. A Thai academic on a visit to Burma watched his
Thai colleagues search for the grave of a long-dead Burmese King—
just so they could gloat over its neglect: the King in question had
been a notorious invader of Thai territory. A party of Burmese
officers on a visit to the ruins of Ayudhya was refused a ride in a
local trishaw: the driver cited Burma’s sacking of the city in 1767.
Nationalism, offering citizens an overarching sense of belonging to
a state, may be a relatively new concept, but the roots of
nationalist sentiment are deeply embedded in the historical
memories of each society.

Given these parochial traditions, the concept of Southeast Asia as
a unified region has been hard to sell. Academic conceptualisations
of Southeast Asia have tended to dwell on the region’s ethnic and environmental diversity, the rivalry between states in the historical period, and the derivative tensions between nation states today. Early studies, like George Coedes’ ‘Indianised States of Southeast Asia’, also stressed the lack of an original unifying culture. Instead, Southeast Asia was conceived as a blend of two great Asian civilising powers, China and India:

Behind the manifest variations of Asia…lies not one civilisation but different root civilisations—the Sinitic, Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist.5

Western scholarship has played up deep and immutable divisions between the cultural components of Southeast Asia, arguing that the notion of Southeast Asia as a coherent geographical region was first derived from the Allied ‘Southeast Asia Command’ overseeing the campaign against the Japanese imperial army during the Pacific War. The American scholar Lucian Pye admits to the ethnocentricity driving this generalisation when he writes that: ‘the conventional wisdom, holding that at times it is appropriate to minimise Europe’s diversities and concentrate on its common heritage, judges Asia’s differences to be unmanageable’.6

Judging how much Southeast Asians have in common with each other is, like any other conception of a region, a subjective exercise. The French eat garlic and cook in olive oil, the British do not. Yet Southeast Asians share a common basic diet of rice, chili and fish. Still, Europeans consider that a common civilisation binds them together and that Southeast Asians, by comparison, have a more diverse cultural heritage. One reason for these mixed perceptions is the contrasting cultural view of diversity.

The region’s ethnic and cultural mosaic is undeniably complex. Also irrefutable is the cultural influence of its two great Asian neighbours, China and India. However, the common response to these external influences is often missed. That response might be characterised as a blending process; one that acquired aspects of external culture and religion, while preserving elements of indigenous culture. Thus throughout Southeast Asia, one comes across a spectrum of variation: Islam that retains elements of the pre-existing Hindu tradition in Indonesia; Buddhism that tolerates spirit worship in Thailand and Burma; and Catholicism which never quite suppressed pagan rites associated with ancestor
worship in the Philippines. This common response to the waves of external influences that swept over the region through history may not seem like much of a binding principle, but Southeast Asians find that it breeds familiarity:

You have to understand the moorings of Southeast Asia. Lifeways were shaped by the same environment. The physical environment shapes a kind of behaviour that is homogeneous. True, we all belong to different ethnic groups. But the differences between ethnic groups may not be as intense as between ethnic groups in other regions. The common experience of having been a stamping ground of the great powers is a kind of negative commonality.7

Burma, Indonesia and Vietnam were all at some point in history invaded by China. The resistance put up by these states helped define the limits of Chinese imperial control in the period, just as the gates of Vienna marked for a long while the high-tide of Ottoman expansion, and therefore the edge of Europe.

The colonial era helped obscure common features of the region by dividing it up into conflicting spheres of colonial power and influence. Indochina was French, Burma was under the English, and Siam acted as a buffer inbetween. The Netherlands Indies held its own under the Dutch except for a brief period of British rule over Java and Sumatra in the early nineteenth century. The Philippines, which was initially subject to Islamic influence, fell under Spanish Catholic rule in the sixteenth century. European rule infused Southeast Asia with Western culture and ideas, but it also carved up the region erasing areas of overlapping or ambiguous sovereignty that once helped to diffuse cultural identities. Thus Siam was cut off from its vassal states in the Malay archipelago. Sea-trading links between the Indonesian islands and mainland Southeast Asia were supplanted by colonial shipping lines. It is ironic that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Malay was the lingua franca of trade in much of maritime Southeast Asia. Today, the common language of commerce is English.

Historically, Southeast Asian states were rather more loosely defined, based on sacral centres of power whose radiance diminished with distance from the centre. For centuries Southeast Asian monarchs claimed suzerainty over large swathes of territory
based on little more than tenuous personal ties to local rulers and infrequent payment of tithes or tribute. There was also a dimension of sacral space bearing no relation to geographical or social realities. Thus the ancient Mon Kingdom centred in what is today Southern Burma was defined by thirty two sacred shrines or objects. European colonial administrators introduced the notion of physical borders and centralised administration to the region. The Europeans brought with them maps and border-markers. They set up district offices and outposts of central authority. Imperialism not only subjugated Southeast Asian peoples; it also organised them into more strictly defined geographical units most of which later defined modern nation states.

Western colonialism also brought with it the baggage of European prejudice. Most Westerners came from societies that experienced violent schisms over race, religion or ideology. When they observed people of different race or religion living together in an Asian context, their instinct was to assume incompatibility. The social rationality of nineteenth century Weberian thought projects that a secular society is more desirable because non-secular societies are riddled by conflicts of belief. Observing the rise of nationalism in India the British author E.M. Forster saw Hindus, Moslems, Sikhs and others ‘trying to like each other more than came natural to them’. Of course, prejudice is not an exclusively European vice, and minorities have faced periodic adversity in Southeast Asia. But intergroup friction that results in violence tends to be the exception in the region, not the rule. It is often the product of abnormal circumstances such as acute economic stress, or the result of ruling elites manipulating prejudice to create a diversion.

Although lack of physical contact, an attachment to land and place and the imposition of concrete borders has maintained Southeast Asia, actually as well as perceptually, as a disembodied region, there are grounds for believing that this is slowly changing. Flying in the face of the tendency to conceive Southeast Asia as too diverse to be considered a region has been the flowering of what is sometimes considered the world’s most successful regional association.
Oddly enough it was the Cold War, the greatest political schism of the century, which first drew modern Southeast Asian states together. With Communist China at the door after 1949, the Western powers pushed for the establishment of an ill-conceived NATO clone, the South East Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO). Perhaps it bode well for the region that huddling under the wings of a superpower was not to be the vehicle used to foster regionalism. When SEATO was formed in 1955, Indonesia, and later Malaya, refused to join. As Indonesian scholar Dewi Anwar points out, the reluctance with which the allied powers backed the infant Indonesian Republic against their ally the Dutch, bred a deep and lasting suspicion of the West in Indonesian diplomats. This suspicion made Indonesia a natural supporter of the non-aligned movement and led directly to the 1955 Asian-Africa conference, a gathering of many newly independent nations held in the Indonesian town of Bandung under the direction of Indonesia’s first president, Sukarno.

The Bandung conference was as much a natural postscript to the region’s anti-colonial struggle as it was a natural extension of Sukarno’s ego. However, Bandung was an important milestone in regional diplomacy. The conference, convened in the old Dutch hill-resort and university town northwest of Jakarta, bred a sense of pride in the re-emerging states of Asia. For a brief moment, atavistic nationalism and ideology were cast aside in favour of solidarity and brotherhood. At Bandung there was India’s Nehru, China’s Zhou Enlai, and Egypt’s Gamal Abdul Nasser rubbing shoulders and thumbing their noses at the West. Bandung provided a platform for the recently decolonised nations to gloat over the retreat of colonialism. Bandung also put Sukarno and Indonesia firmly in the regional driving seat—a diplomatic opportunity Sukarno was soon to squander with his attack on neighbouring Malaysia. Sukarno’s ‘Confrontation’ of Malaysia from 1963 to 1966 was a pivotal event in regional history.

Initially, the cooperative spirit forged in Bandung was stillborn. The landing of Indonesian forces in West Malaysia in late 1964 dispelled the mesmerising collective euphoria bred by the triumph of nationalism. It focused attention instead on expansionism in the region. Confrontation also brought ideas of a common alliance with the West under the SEATO umbrella down in a hail of
rhetoric and military bravado, convincing the Americans that Communism had already crept in through the back door. But ironically, ‘Confrontation’ provided the real impetus for consociation among Southeast Asian states. They were driven by fear of each other, not the outside world. As Malaysia’s Anwar Ibrahim reminds us: ‘traditional statecraft throughout the region has been expansionist and imperialist in tendency’.11

If the demise of colonial rule restored the opportunity for states to revive precolonial political traditions, it also allowed them to prey on one another. Thailand marched into the Shan States, the Northern Malay States and parts of Cambodia under Japanese protection in 1941. In the 1920s, Indonesian nationalists tried to persuade their Malay cousins across the Malacca straits that their struggle for independence was one and the same. After the war, Sukarno pressed home these designs on the Malay peninsula and Northern Borneo. The Philippines claimed the old territory of North Borneo, which joined the Malaysian Federation as Sabah, and Malaysia itself had designs on oil-rich Brunei until the mid-1960s.

The formation of the Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN) by the Bangkok Declaration on 8 August 1967 was aimed at suppressing these intraregional conflicts. The first sentence of the Bangkok Declaration speaks of ‘mutual interests and common problems among countries in Southeast Asia’ and calls for a ‘firm foundation for common action to promote regional cooperation’. At its birth ASEAN was composed of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Singapore. Brunei joined after gaining its independence from the United Kingdom in 1984. Vietnam became ASEAN’s newest member in 1995. Cambodia and Laos are not far behind, and Burma is slowly being drawn into the ASEAN diplomatic orbit. Although officially cloaked in the jargon of economic cooperation, ASEAN was actually conceived as a security body. Indonesia, for example, saw the association as a means of erecting a security buffer around the archipelago, shielding it from China and the Soviet Union.12 Thailand was looking for a bulwark against communist Indochina, and Singapore needed to be considered an equal partner by its two larger neighbours.

However, instead of forging an actual military alliance, ASEAN established a vague, almost symbolic commitment to cooperate across a broad spectrum of endeavours. The senior Malaysian
diplomat, who also served as Home Minister, Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie witnessed the founding of ASEAN. He likes to describe the association as resting on the simple principle of togetherness, using the Malay term sekampung, the warm feeling of community felt by villagers in a Kampung, or village. In fact, ASEAN rests on two important diplomatic principles. The first is that all member states agree to abide by a consensus—meaning that no single state can decide on anything without the full endorsement of all the other members. They also agreed not to interfere in one another’s internal affairs. One can quibble about the effectiveness of ASEAN as a vehicle for concrete economic cooperation but it cannot be denied that by using diplomatic rather than military means, as well as a style of diplomacy based on indigenous rather than imported principles, ASEAN has succeeded in fostering a greater sense of regional unity and security. As a Thai diplomat put it: ‘In 1967 we were a group of nations who hardly knew each other; two of our members were quarrelling, and we were all developing nations. Yet we agreed on a principle of solidarity, even though this might not be compatible with our own interests.’

Like any other regional association, ASEAN is long on rhetoric and short on substance. Officially the association projects itself as a vehicle for economic cooperation: in fact it is a coalition of strategic and political interests—and perhaps a means of ensuring that these interests remain the same for all the member states. ASEAN does not constitute a perfect union of interests. It was never intended to integrate the region in the same way that Monnet envisaged a united Europe. The concept of regional identity envisaged by ASEAN combines unity with diversity:

ASEAN as it stands now will not lead to a united Southeast Asia for that was not what it was created to do. On the contrary, ASEAN has contributed to the development of its members into more vigorous and resilient sovereign states.

Preserving sovereignty and ‘resilience’ has primarily helped preserve the political status quo. Political interests, as we saw earlier, tend to be rooted in a firm conviction in the strength of the state, and the subordination of society to the state. ASEAN has not acted as an organisation to enforce these interests across borders. Rather, it has offered these states the security to defend their political interests against external pressure. ASEAN has served the
political interests of ruling elites in Southeast Asia well. It has provided fertile ground for the growth of the banyan tree.

The formula worked well so long as there was no real imperative to enforce uniformity in either political or economic spheres. Global conditions are making it more difficult for ASEAN to survive as a loose coalition of interests, however. The evolution of a more interdependent global trading system has made a more coordinated trade policy essential; the linkage between politics and trade means that respect for sovereignty has weakened; the emergence of regional powers raises questions about collective security. In the face of the changing parameters of international relations, ASEAN countries have begun to realise that closer cooperation is not just a remote ideal, but more of a priority. This may alter the balance between unity and diversity, and ultimately affect the pace of political change.

We are seeing the change occurring first of all in the commercial sphere. Economic cooperation has been slow to take off in ASEAN. But this should not be surprising, given that member states compete to sell roughly the same products in the same markets. Neither have they been really keen to allow their neighbour’s products to be sold in their own market. It took almost 25 years to agree on lowering trade barriers. The ASEAN free trade area (AFTA) launched in 1992 (with the aim of creating a regional market free of non-tariff barriers and a maximum effective tariff of 5 per cent across the board within 20 years) has run up against strong protectionist interests in member countries. Agreement on a timetable of tariff reductions across the board has been revised twice since then. ‘The AFTA agreement only consists of 12 pages’, notes Indonesian regional affairs specialist Cornelius Luhulima. ‘This indicates that ASEAN leaders have come to an agreement first, instead of thinking, discussing and planning it first.’

ASEAN may have been ahead of the curve in conceiving itself as a free trade area, but since the conclusion of the Uruguay Round, and the formation of the World Trade Organisation in 1994, trade barriers are coming down faster than ever imagined. ASEAN also faces competition as a regional forum. The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Process, established at Australia’s initiative in 1989, signalled the desire of states in the wider Asia—Pacific region to harness themselves to the region’s economic dynamism. Both the WTO and APEC are goading ASEAN into more action over liberalising trade.
There is, however, a price to be paid for juggling closer cooperation and the congruence of interests with respect for sovereignty. Inevitably, as the region becomes more integrated, primordial nationalist sentiment has periodically breached the surface. Overlapping territorial claims preoccupy diplomats, who hold endless rounds of meetings to argue the finer points of baselines. Indonesia and Malaysia dispute the ownership of Sipadan and Ligitan, two small islands off the coast of Sabah and the Philippines, claim over Sabah remains formally unresolved. The migratory movement of labour across borders is breeding a new set of social problems. Malaysia plays host to over a million Indonesians, Thailand to over half a million Burmese. The presence of large groups of foreigners in the workforce can and has affected bilateral ties. When Singapore hanged the Filipina maid Flor Contemplacion in March 1995, diplomatic relations between Manila and Singapore came close to being severed. On a diplomatic level, ASEAN member states compete with one another over multilateral initiatives. Indonesia’s support for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation process is matched by Malaysia’s fervour for an East Asian Economic Caucus. Thailand was the progenitor of the AFTA—and so on.

ASEAN addresses these differences by trying to ignore them. The association serves as a valuable institution for dissipating friction and confrontation within the region. The tone of ASEAN statements is always moderate and compromising. There have been no attempts by ASEAN as an association to mediate in unresolved boundary disputes between members. In none of these cases has anyone resorted to asserting their sovereignty by force; the consensus is that it is better to negotiate a legal settlement—‘jaw jaw’ instead of ‘war war’. Whenever two ASEAN countries squabble, the rest appear to put on blinkers and refuse to comment or intervene—even though quiet mediating efforts may be undertaken to resolve the dispute. More recently, rather than addressing these historical claims to one another’s territory directly, ASEAN countries have been exploring joint development. The idea is to dissolve disputed borders using commerce and trade as a solvent. Thailand and Malaysia have formally agreed to jointly develop a disputed area of the Gulf of Thailand. Sub-regional zones of joint economic development and cooperation are helping to dissolve boundaries in areas where they were once either contested or under the threat of contest because of the
pressure for command over resources. These are pragmatic solutions to protracted differences—a style of diplomacy the rest of the world could derive some benefit from.

Of course, history teaches us that it never pays to rule out future conflicts. There is a school of thought which sees Southeast Asian states rushing headlong into conflict with one another over land and resources that are becoming less and less abundant with the current pace of growth. Indeed, in late 1993 a Thai defence ministry white paper concluded that the chief threat to the country’s security stemmed from unresolved boundary disputes and the competition for resources in the region. But there is also new thinking that sees these potential flash-points becoming less volatile as state and private-sector initiatives dilute the importance of national boundaries through trade and investment.

In the more sensitive field of security many governments still prefer to deal with one another on a bilateral basis. Under the terms of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation signed by ASEAN leaders in 1976, an ASEAN High Council could technically sit and judge regional squabbles; it has never been called. The ASEAN Regional Forum was established in 1992 to include all the major powers in the region in an informal security dialogue. In one way the ARF sidesteps the whole question of multilateral ASEAN defence cooperation by placing security management in the wider context of the Asia-Pacific region. Quite cleverly, it also brings in the major powers, specifically China and the United States, under a confidence-building umbrella coordinated by the ASEAN states themselves.

After almost three decades, something of an ASEAN bureaucratic culture has evolved. The endless rounds of meetings and bureaucratic paperwork—costing each country in the region of US$ 1 million a year—serves the valuable purpose of putting officials together; forcing them to discuss their problems informally in corridors, over hotel banquet tables, and on the golf course, as well as at the formal conference table. There is no doubt that as a confidence building measure, ASEAN has an astonishing record. When China adopted a more aggressive posture towards its territorial claims in the South China Sea in early 1995, ASEAN responded by issuing a joint statement that was remarkable because it united countries with varying degrees of fear and sympathy for China—against China’s actions. Beijing responded,
in fact, by withdrawing a claim to the Natuna island chain which Indonesia claims.

Although differences between ASEAN states have often frustrated attempts to knit a common position, regular meetings of officials and ministers have helped to forge, if not a common regional identity, then a fusing of common interests. In some ways, it is almost as if ASEAN has begun to reproduce elements of pre-colonial Southeast Asia; when borders were vaguely defined, the relations between states depended on a web of personal ties, and the actual power of the state was more symbolic than real. On a micro-level this diffusion of central state power can already be seen in the evolution of cross-border economic growth areas agreed upon between Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia in the South, and Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand in the North. A third intraregional economic sub-region is being promoted between Northern Thailand, Laos, Burma and Yunnan. Remarkably, a senior Thai military official said he could envisage the day when ‘the economic power of regional city-states eclipses the power of the centralised state’. If the future of modern states is diluted sovereignty, Southeast Asia will be protected from any conflict this might lead to by the flexibility and pragmatism of regional diplomacy.

In a broader context, ASEAN has helped put Southeast Asia on the geopolitical map. The association’s annual ministerial meetings attract global attention. All the region’s major trading partners attend what is called the Post Ministerial Conference. Since 1992, the PMC has been expanded to include all 18 Asia-Pacific nations in a security dialogue dubbed the ASEAN Regional Forum. Attending ASEAN meetings was once a chore for foreign ministers of the major Western powers. Today, they would not miss a single meeting. Their countries are courting ASEAN markets and need a foothold in the region. Now it’s the turn of ASEAN diplomats to complain about all the meetings they must have with the major powers.

ASEAN does not entertain plans for a union along European lines. But like the European Union, the association is growing in size as neighbouring states find the post-Cold War environment conducive to establishing a regional identity. ASEAN’s non-ideological tradition and respect for diversity made it relatively easy for communist Vietnam to apply for membership. In fact, the main worry for ASEAN has not been whether Vietnam will alter
ideological course, but whether it is ready for free trade. Remarkably little is said in ASEAN circles about one another’s politics, which means that it is a poor forum in which to lobby for political change. Yet, as we saw in an earlier chapter, ASEAN has helped form a common front against universal notions of human rights and democracy—a move all the more remarkable since ASEAN countries themselves don’t share common views on how to define democracy.

The pressure of external influence may, however, be a more powerful impetus for forging a common identity than perceptions of common values. Indeed, as we saw in the earlier discussion about perceptions of democracy, external pressure seems to stimulate the search for common values. In history, the only effective unity Europe ever achieved was against the threat of Islam from the Turkish Empire. It was the belated influence of Islamic civilisation which sowed the seeds of Europe’s Renaissance. Similarly, a commonly perceived, but rarely expressed fear of Southeast Asia’s near neighbours is also compelling countries in the region to forge closer bonds.

**CHINA KNOCKS: THE STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE FOR A REGIONAL IDENTITY**

In 1289, envoys sent by the Mongol Emperor Kublai Khan to exact tribute from the Javanese empire of Majapahit were defiantly sent packing with what the chronicles describe as ‘disfigured faces’—generally taken to mean that their ears or noses were cut off. A subsequent Chinese invasion of Majapahit in 1293 met with mixed results and was abandoned. The Chinese never attempted an invasion of Java again. But it is a victory Indonesians have never forgotten. A painting of the disfigured envoys incident hung until recently in the headquarters of the Indonesian intelligence agency (BAKIN). When BAKIN moved to its new office, so the story goes, it left the painting to the Chinese embassy which is now, ironically, temporarily housed in the old BAKIN building. The Imperial army had better luck in Burma, occupying the Burmese capital at Pagan in 1287. After overcoming almost a thousand years of Chinese rule, Vietnam spent much of its early independent history repelling Chinese invasions. A visitor to the National History Museum in Hanoi comes across diorama after technicolour *papier mâché* diorama depicting how and where the
Vietnamese threw back the imperial armies. In one particularly striking scene the resourceful Vietnamese use fire boats to defeat an imperial Chinese fleet.

Today, Chinese cultural influence is benignly evident throughout Southeast Asia. The impact of this great northern neighbour is evident from styles of pottery and cuisine to the commercial terms used in many indigenous languages. Much of the region’s urban architecture, particularly in provincial towns, follows the same design: the ubiquitous two storey ‘Chinese shop house’, with retail space on the ground floor and living quarters above. Less often expressed, is the historical memory of China’s imperial designs on Southeast Asia. Actual invasion may have failed to subdue the princely states of the region, but the threat of invasion was translated into one of the more successful forms of imperialism ever practised. Few of the precolonial states of Southeast Asia failed at some point in history to pay homage to the celestial kingdom through the payment of tribute.

The tributary system was as benign as it was effective—turning imperial design into commercial gain. In simple terms, far-flung kingdoms undertook to send regular tributary missions bearing goods to Beijing for considerable profit, in return for which Beijing could claim to be the centre of the civilised world—without having to bear the expense and logistical difficulty of actually governing an extended empire. As the British scholar Gerald Segal put it: ‘The Chinese empire was able to sustain both the illusion and sometimes the reality of great-power status and self-sufficiency.’

In modern times, perhaps only the Ottomans approached the Chinese in the economy of their vassal-state system.

The colonial era and the slow collapse of Imperial China under the Qing dynasty interrupted contact with what the Chinese have always considered their geopolitical bailiwick. From a historical perspective this could be seen as a hiatus—a mere 200 year pause in over 1,000 years of Chinese regional influence. For once China recovered its composure and began to develop economic and military clout, its desire to exercise influence overseas was bound to follow. The new order in China after 1949 may have been a communist one, but it was nothing short of Chinese; it draws on tradition as much for the definition of the state from within, as for its perception of the outside world. There is no evidence that Marxism changed the traditional Chinese world view of what the Thai scholar and diplomat Sarasin Viraphol elegantly characterises
as ‘national security based on self-imposed semi-isolation and non-equality of foreign intercourse’.

Communist China’s adventurism in the region from the 1950s, was a symptom of China’s new forward strategy in Southeast Asia, deploying subversion by local communist parties. Up until the mid-1980s, in places even later, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines battled entrenched local communist insurgencies in rural areas. Communism expired as an international force with the end of the Cold War in 1989, but China was not defeated. The guerrilla-style communist insurgencies backed by Beijing were next to impossible to completely stamp out. Instead, by the early 1980s China itself opted for a change of strategy. Using these local insurgencies as a bargaining chip, Beijing withdrew its backing from local communist parties in favour of a more diplomatic approach to Southeast Asia.

The next phase of China’s engagement with Southeast Asia might, to borrow from Mao, be aptly summarised as ‘let a thousand capitalists bloom’. The opening of China’s economy in the 1980s needed capital which, initially at least, was not forthcoming from the West because of human rights concerns and difficult market conditions. So China tapped the next best source, the ethnic Chinese community. Lee Kuan Yew may be right that as ethnic Chinese ‘our stakes are in our home countries, not in China where our ancestors came from’. But for many of the region’s more successful ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs there is far more money to be made in a homogeneous market of one billion people than in the diverse, fragmented market of 400 million which defines Southeast Asia. China is regarded as potentially the largest economy on the globe. And for many ethnic Chinese, if not too distant ancestral ties give them a comparative advantage, why not exploit that advantage?

Dhanin Chearavanont, the executive chairman of Charoen Pokphand (CP Group), Thailand’s largest conglomerate, laughs when asked about CP’s prospects in the ASEAN market. ‘ASEAN is a market of 400 million people. China and India together are almost two billion’, he says. Dhanin is quick to lay diplomatic stress on the group’s core activities in Thailand, but reluctant to say how much CP group has invested in China. (They have joint ventures in virtually every province in China.) Dhanin dismisses the inquiry with a vague reference to the mix of ‘private and public concerns’ which apparently makes disclosure problematic.
Although accurate statistics are hard to come by, Southeast Asia’s 23 million ethnic Chinese had probably contributed around US$ 8 billion in foreign direct investment to China by the mid-1990s. Though small by comparison with the amount of investment in China by Chinese from Hong Kong (around US$ 40 billion) and probably Taiwan as well, the role of Southeast Asia’s Chinese in the growth of China’s economy has been conspicuous for other reasons. Southeast Asia has by far the largest concentration of ethnic Chinese; they account for about 85 per cent of the region’s capital. Concerns about capital flight are growing, both with the threat of ethnic tension at home under conditions of economic stress and because of signs that China is about to enter a period of nationalist fervour. As one regional official put it:

No longer revolutionary, but still a status quo power, China remains inscrutable. And now regional anxiety is growing that Beijing may be deliberately using Chinese nationalism as the binder of national unity—in place of a bankrupt ideology. This will make China an even more prickly neighbour than it is already.

Latent questions about the dominance of ethnic Chinese enterprise in Southeast Asia are becoming entangled with the elemental strategic issue of China’s posture towards the sovereignty of Southeast Asian states.

These two concerns seemed to meet dramatically on 14 April 1994 when a single ethnic Chinese businessman was killed during a labour protest in the Indonesian city of Medan. Remarkably enough, China responded. A foreign ministry official in Beijing said that China hoped order would be restored as soon as possible in Medan. Though no reference was made to the Indonesian Chinese casualty, Beijing’s comments were met by a stern riposte from Jakarta. And, of all places, Singapore, which reminded China that the affairs of overseas Chinese were no longer tied to China.

China has consistently denied any strategic designs on Southeast Asia. Beijing consistently asserts that China’s foreign policy is governed by five principles of peaceful coexistence: mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty; mutual non-aggression; non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence. However, the
following assessment of how China sees the world is perhaps a better guide to China’s probable role in the region:

In terms of comprehensive national strength, the US, of course, is still the most powerful country in the Pacific region. But with the relative decline of its economic strength, over-extension of its front, and the limitation of its power, the heyday of US unitary hegemony has gone forever. Japan has become an economic power and is going to be a political power. Without doubt its role in East Asia will be continuously enhanced. But due to fundamental contradictions and conflicts between Japan and the US in the economic area, the domestic constraints within Japan, and the opposition of many countries of the region, it is difficult for Japan to realise the ‘Japan Dominating System’ or the ‘US-Japan Alliance Dominating System’ in East Asia.\(^\text{26}\)

The author, a prominent academic from Shanghai, goes on to cast doubt on an immediate role for Russia in the region, and concludes by saying that: ‘China has become an important political stabiliser in East Asia.’

Certainly the growth of China’s economy is making it harder for Beijing diplomats to tread so lightly on Southeast Asian sensitivities. China’s claim to the South China Sea, in which Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines also claim small territorial stakes, is not new. But Beijing has renewed these historical claims with vigour, insisting that China’s claim to sovereignty was not negotiable. In 1974 and 1988, China used military force to seize territory in the South China Sea. In 1995, the discovery of structures built by the Chinese military on Mischief Reef, an atoll claimed by the Philippines, prompted a minor naval stand-off. The probability that China will one day enforce these claims grows with the size of its GDP. ‘China will use its military force when it sees the opportunity. This irredentism must rank as the largest challenge to the status quo...’, writes Gerald Segal.\(^\text{27}\) In 1979, China and Vietnam fought a border war in which China seemed to come off the worse. In 1988, the two countries skirmished in the disputed Spratly island chain. Memories of these conflicts, married to a much enhanced power projection capability, including the possible introduction of aircraft carriers and medium range missiles, have fuelled what one
veteran Indonesian diplomat calls the ‘historical uneasiness between China and Southeast Asia’.\textsuperscript{28}

Though mostly unspoken in ASEAN official circles, suspicion of China’s strategic expansion is probably as great today as it was when Beijing was promoting hegemony in the guise of Marxist revolution. ‘Historically, China has always expanded southward, never to the east or north’, commented a senior Indonesian military officer in 1993.\textsuperscript{29} But the texture of these perceptions varies from country to country. At one extreme, Indonesia argues that China is the chief threat to Southeast Asia’s security. The Indonesian military sees China moving inexorably towards asserting its strategic interests in Southeast Asia, fearing that if Beijing’s territorial claims were realised, China would become a Southeast Asian state—or vice versa. Thailand, which historically has always appeased China, tends to view Beijing’s strategic manoeuvring as an inevitable, even understandable, response to the posturing of other regional superpowers—Japan, Russia and the United States—which seek to contain China. Nevertheless, all the countries of the region are concerned about the impact of China’s emerging superpower status on the balance of power in the region.

From the mid-1990s, ASEAN officials watched nervously as closer ties between Beijing and Rangoon effectively gave the Chinese military access to the entrance of the Straits of Malacca. China established electronic listening posts on islands in the Andaman Sea just north of the straits. Burma also bought or bartered for arms from China worth over US$ 1 billion, and played court to China’s fledgling forward policy in Southeast Asia. In return, Rangoon found a powerful ally and surrogate donor as Western countries shunned Burma’s generals over their human rights record. Any move against Burma in the United Nations security council, for instance, would meet a Chinese veto. In Burma, China found a way to flex its diplomatic muscle. When Chinese premier Li Peng visited Rangoon in December 1994, he pointedly defended the military junta. Western diplomats in the Burmese capital compared the tenor of the Chinese leader’s remarks to the way a US leader would behave in a client state.\textsuperscript{30}

China’s looming status as a regional superpower has made the ASEAN states nervous and helped strengthen moves towards regional cooperation. Though unspoken, this concern helped cement a policy of ‘constructive engagement’ with Burma in the
early 1990s. ASEAN diplomats defended their contacts with the military junta on the grounds that it would foster economic security and therefore political change in Burma. In reality, they cared less about the pace of political change and more about checking China’s growing influence in Rangoon.\textsuperscript{31} The most obvious benefit to China was a land link to the sea for its Southwestern provinces. A 1985 article by former vice-minister of communications Pan Qi in the English language Beijing Review described a strategy of ‘opening up Southwest China’ in the following terms: ‘Looking towards the South, we could find outlets in Burma.’\textsuperscript{32}

If indeed this is China’s long term aim, the signs are it is materialising. Physical contact between Southwest China and Southeast Asia will soon be established with the forging of road and rail links between Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Burma and China’s Southwestern province of Yunnan. The value of crossborder trade between Burma and Yunnan already exceeds US $1.5 billion a year. As well as acting as a conduit for cheap consumer goods flooding the markets of Burma, Laos and Vietnam, Yunnan is also a potential source of cheap labour for Thailand’s more developed economy. Eventually, Yunnan will export better quality products at a lower price than Thailand because labour and materials are cheaper. ‘A bit like dancing with a dinosaur’, was how one Western intelligence source in Bangkok characterised the impact of Yunnan’s relatively industrialised economy of 38 million people on Thailand’s economy.\textsuperscript{33}

‘With the possibility that China will become the world’s biggest economy some time in the next century’, wrote Singapore’s Minister for Information and the Arts, George Yeo in late 1993, ‘old fears are bound to resurface. Thus a common East Asian consciousness can never be formed with China placing itself at the centre.’\textsuperscript{34} But a common Southeast Asian consciousness is being spurred on by these developments. Fear of China, and to a lesser extent of a powerful Japan, helps explain why Southeast Asians are taking a more purposeful look at forging a common identity. Just as the thirteenth-century Javanese response to the threat from the Mongol empire was to forge alliances with neighbouring kingdoms, so the modern states of Southeast Asia are pondering closer cooperation to meet the challenge of local external powers. Any move in this direction is likely to have a significant impact on
local notions of sovereignty and political autonomy, and inevitably on the process of political change.

**DREAMING OF ONE SOUTHEAST ASIA**

We the undersigned citizens of Southeast Asia, meeting in Manila, Republic of the Philippines, on 30–31 May 1994, do hereby adopt and advocate the following vision of our region. We believe that Southeast Asia should be a community. Collectively, this community should be a major, economic, cultural, and moral entity on the world in the 21st century.  

Citing a medley of reasons—from the need to avoid looking inward as a region, to recognition of the region’s common cultural traditions—a group of nineteen prominent Southeast Asian academics and officials launched the concept of ‘One Southeast Asia’ in mid-1994. This ambitious idea goes a step beyond ASEAN, in that it focuses on the social and cultural dimension of regional cooperation. Stress is laid on a common identity as well as common interests. In diplomatic terms, the idea lays the groundwork for all ten countries of Southeast Asia to become part of ASEAN. Yet by introducing the cultural dimension, the idea comes across as rather inward-looking and defensive, cutting against the grain of global trends towards open rather than closed regionalism.

Southeast Asia has always been a cross-roads of cultures and commodities. Why the need to erect cultural barriers? The strategic challenge posed by a resurgent China and pressure to conform with global standards of political and commercial behaviour may help explain. Confronted by a world impinging on sovereignty and cultural norms, the response has been to shore up the regional boundaries. As an earlier study of the concept opined; ‘Integration is not a matter of choice…it is a necessity arising from the fact of shared destiny.’

For the time being the concept of full-blown unity—either in institutional or social and political terms—remains a gleam in the eyes of a handful of regional intellectuals. But the trend is unmistakeable. ASEAN has moved closer to forging free trade, freer movement of people, and is getting accustomed to a free exchange of ideas. ‘The view has become more widespread than
outsiders imagine—and the groundwork for it has in fact begun’, notes Jose Almonte. Assuming this trend towards regionalism develops, what impact will it have on the political landscape? Judging from the sentiments expressed by Witoon from Project for Ecological Recovery at the beginning of this chapter, it could have a liberalising effect forcing states to adjust their norms to an acceptable regional standard or even universal standards. The question is what defines the standard—the soft-authoritarian style of Mahathir’s Malaysia, or the muddled ‘demi-democracy’ of Thailand? Indeed, at first glance, Vietnam’s accession to ASEAN in July 1995 did little to bring about political change: if anything, ASEAN officials saw Vietnam’s membership as a move the Vietnamese Communist Party exploited to strengthen its legitimacy at home.37 Closer contact between grassroots pressure groups will make it harder to deny liberal voices of dissent, but those voices will run up against the unifying effects of closer cooperation between ruling elites. More liberal governments will be less inclined to argue with their less liberal neighbours for fear of disrupting regional stability. This points to a dilemma: a society that supports the growth of a strong state, also acquires the potential to question the rule of the state.

Evidence of this dilemma can be found in contemporary Burma, where the pro-democracy opposition movement has drawn strength from its ties to like-minded Thai activists across the border. But at the same time, the Thai military has offered help or does business with the military junta in Rangoon. Burma, like Vietnam, has benefited greatly from the regional cohesion fostered by ASEAN. After two decades of sustained growth, the original six ASEAN states have acquired a modicum of economic clout in the region. Volumes of trade and investment from ASEAN helped sustain Vietnam’s economy until the US lifted its trade embargo on Vietnam in 1994. The ASEAN states are beginning to offer modest amounts of aid to Indochina and Burma. Singapore has parlayed discrete defence contacts with Burma into more diversified technical assistance, which included running a domestic airline and building new hotels and an airport. Admittedly, the size of this aid cannot even begin to match the spending power of the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund (Thailand offered Burma a US $ 120 million soft loan to Burma for road improvement in the Northern Shan States in 1994.) But it suggests a willingness to fill the void in Burma, where Western governments maintain an
embargo on multilateral assistance and talk about imposing economic sanctions. ASEAN’s stance on Burma may seem distasteful to critics of the Burmese military junta; more objectively it lends substance to the idea of a common regional endeavour.

The diplomatic groundwork for ‘One Southeast Asia’ was in fact laid over the past decade, and began in earnest with the move to draw Vietnam into ASEAN. Vietnam did not need much persuasion. Hanoi first discovered how effective regional diplomacy could be when ASEAN took a strong stand against Vietnam’s occupation of Cambodia after 1979. ASEAN diplomats coordinated and sustained a lobby supporting the Cambodian resistance coalition’s occupancy of the country’s seat at the United Nations. Sustaining this position prevented the Hanoi-sponsored government in Phnom Penh from acquiring international legitimacy, forcing it to negotiate with the Cambodian resistance factions in another ASEAN-coordinated initiative that eventually led to the 1991 Paris Peace agreement. The Cambodian peace process had to be endorsed by the Western powers and was eventually sucked into a huge United Nations bureaucratic vacuum, all of which diminished the regional dimension in forging the peace. Credit should be awarded to ASEAN, to Southeast Asians themselves, for initiating the withdrawal of Vietnam and a resolution of the vicious conflict between the Cambodian factions. It was a watershed in regional affairs, even if France and the United States were too arrogant or embarrassed to say so too openly.

Although scarcely realised, ASEAN’s diplomatic experience with Cambodia, and more recently in Burma, has highlighted the region’s potential to become master of its own political destiny. The practice of sending tribute to Beijing may not have had any appreciable impact on the sovereignty of these states, but it sustained the illusion of deference to the historical equivalent of a superpower that was only discontinued with the arrival of European colonial powers. The end of the colonial era was quickly followed by the onset of the Cold War and a new era of dependence on superpower patronage. Although taking a common political stand and the search for a more autonomous regional order were enshrined as basic principles when ASEAN was formed in 1967, it is only really in the 1990s that the region’s economic dynamism, coinciding with the decline of superpower rivalry of the
Cold War, has created an opportunity to begin asserting true regional autonomy.

TOWARDS A SOUTHEAST ASIAN POLITY

If Southeast Asian states bind more closely together, what will the impact be on political systems? It is tempting to imagine that such binding will have a cathartic effect on the process of political change and foster more pluralism. There are signs that this is already happening. Non-governmental organisations are developing a regional network which allows circumscribed or controlled pressure groups in one country to tap support from the region. It has been easy for governments to paint NGOs as unpatriotic when they drew their support exclusively from Western sources, or to claim that they represent a foreign culture. It is rather harder to do so when the support comes from within the region. State control can also be eroded by economic liberalisation. The potential for doing just this comes from the ASEAN Free Trade Area, which is already dismantling the protective barriers used in some countries to protect state monopolies.

Tempting as it is to consider that ‘One Southeast Asia’ will be a freer Southeast Asia—that the process will help trim the banyan tree—there is as much opportunity for the branches of the banyan tree to be strengthened and spread out even wider with more regional cohesion. As we have seen, a major driving force to closer regional integration is the threat of external pressure—both from China and the West. And if it is political elites who fear the corrosive impact of external influence on their power, then quite possibly there is a political agenda backing moves for unity. Certainly, a more politically integrated Southeast Asia could evolve using the same principles that are applied in the diplomatic arena within ASEAN in its present form. Above all, this boils down to a commitment to deliberate and then reach a decision through consensus. Presumably, those states wanting to remain strong would block moves towards a regional parliament, or some statement of political principles that did not recognise their rules of the game. ‘Regardless whether it is authoritarian or democratic, the deciding factor will be the quality of consensus’, argues Jose Almonte.38
Another deciding factor will be the quality and outlook of the region’s leaders once a more unified Southeast Asia emerges. Robert Scalapino argues that the coming generation of leaders will be more inclined to collective leadership because they will have sprung from the ranks of the technocrats who dominate policy-making. They will be less charismatic and therefore less powerful. A more collective approach to leadership might also make them more inclined to cooperate regionally and take advice from their regional colleagues. But what if this new generation of leaders is also concerned about the preservation of the indigenous values claimed by the contemporary political elite? Elsewhere we have heard Malaysia’s Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim talk about preserving the best of tradition. Anwar is also a firm believer in ‘One Southeast Asia’. In fact, the movement is relying on him to push along the agenda. But is Anwar interested in an Asian renaissance or preserving the culture of power and leadership he is likely to inherit? Only time and the long drawn out process of political succession, will tell.

Of course, the danger is that by searching for what the region has culturally in common, competitive urges may creep in and create alarming new divisions. Competing with ‘One Southeast Asia’ are more narrow concepts of closer cooperation between the Malay and Muslim or Buddhist parts of Southeast Asia. There are moves, for example, towards more interaction between the Muslim entrepreneurs of Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei—a revival of the old ‘Malindo’ idea in a private sector context. Such pan-Malay sentiment worries tiny Singapore, once described in geographical terms as ‘the nut between the two arms of the nutcracker’. On the mainland, Thailand dreams of becoming a gateway to the emerging markets of Indochina and Burma. Some planners go further and talk about a pan-Buddhist region encompassing Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Significantly, some regional leaders seemed to be aware of the dangers of cultural bifurcation. In early 1995, Anwar Ibrahim addressed an international seminar on Islam and Confucianism:

here are two great traditions of the world whose adherents have generally been living, if not in perfect harmony with each other, certainly not in antagonism and discord, for the greater part of the last one thousand years. Indeed, through genial co-existence they have contributed, both in the past
and the present, towards regional order and prosperity. One is reminded of the fact that centuries before the Enlightenment in the West, there had already been established productive engagement between the Muslim-Malay Sultanates of Southeast Asia and the Confucian Ming Dynasty of China.**

Although it seems unlikely that Southeast Asia will fragment along religious fault lines, realistically even the most optimistic scenario for a unified Southeast Asia is fraught with limitations. Despite the purposeful rearming that each country has undertaken in the past five years, the region has no effective military clout—the Philippines faced a threat from China to islands it claims in the South China sea with what one Philippine general described as ‘an air force that can’t fly and a navy that can’t put to sea’. And for all the riparian economic behaviour, and slowly shifting patterns of trade, the region’s economies are still dependent on external, principally Western export markets.

Doesn’t this make Southeast Asia vulnerable to external influences for the foreseeable future? Is Anwar Ibrahim dreaming when he claims that ‘the Asia mind has finally broken free from the intellectual morass’ created by the quest for parity with the West. If so, doesn’t this return us to the starting point of this book; the pressure to conform to Western standards of political behaviour? Perhaps for now. But this situation could change in the not too distant future. The only problem is that Southeast Asia may trade dependence on one cultural and commercial hegemon, for another.
Democracy is an optimistic ideology by nature. ‘One of the pleasures of membership of an advanced society’, wrote American columnist Michael Kinsley recently:

is precisely the knowledge that certain mundane aspects of life are shared by all. This gives reality to the otherwise abstract democratic ideal.¹

The study of political change in Southeast Asia is deeply coloured by the notion that countries of the region are in various stages of transition from underdeveloped to more advanced levels of political development. The general assumption underlying the ‘underdeveloped’ to ‘advanced’ transition is that forms of autocracy are evolving into forms of democracy, and that if not voluntarily, then as a result of social and economic change, political elites in the region will progressively yield power to a more representative, pluralistic form of government.

By now it should be apparent that this is a simplistic, in some cases, even an optimistic assumption. The prevailing political cultures of the region are proving resistant to change. There is no simple, linear continuum of democratisation. In the recent history of Southeast Asia, there are more cases of retreat from democracy (Burma, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore). There are fewer cases, to date, where the direction of political change is strengthening democratic institutions (the Philippines and possibly
Neither are the more representative forms of government evolving in some instances duplicating the Western model. We have seen that strong leadership, supported by an enduring culture of patronage, remains a characteristic feature of some of the more economically successful states—in some cases reinforced or revived after brief periods of more pluralistic government. We have encountered a middle-class strata of society who prefer to support the authoritarian status quo rather than risk social upheaval; and we have seen how indigenous spiritual and religious values may replace imported secular ideologies as an idiom of political expression. Finally, it was suggested that a more integrated Southeast Asian community may also strengthen prevailing political values.

This more realistic perspective should not obscure demands for political freedom and democracy that breeds tension and demands for political change in the more authoritarian states of the region. The tension is real, if somewhat confined to a narrow spectrum of liberal intellectual activists. There is no doubt that more educated, economically enfranchised members of society in countries like Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia yearn for more freedom to act and think for themselves. Although tempting to build into a wave for the future, it is important to remember that economic security also breeds complacency and support for the political status quo—particularly in a political culture where the heel of oppression is lightly applied, and the hand of patron-age is often more evident. The media play up the trials and jail sentences endured by those who campaign for freedom. But democracy activists in these countries also have to combat apathy bred of material comfort, and a tenacious jealousy of one another’s status and position that obstructs common efforts to push for political change. It is easier for ruling elites to trim the banyan tree at their convenience; harder for activists to muster the strength to hack off whole limbs.

At the threshold of the new century, the political complexion of Southeast Asia is not the mirror image of the West the departing colonial powers envisaged as their legacy 50 years ago. What of the future? For those bent on discerning a continuum, economics is seen as the key to change. One of the most persuasive arguments for the evolution of a Western-style civil society in Southeast Asia is that the region’s commercial practices are beginning to resemble those of the West. The term used to describe this process is ‘convergence’. 
Governments in the region are framing laws that enshrine aspects of standard commercial practice in the West, such as intellectual property and fiscal disclosure. As they do so they encourage more transparency in the commercial field, and hopefully build up more accountability in the political system. The so-called ‘convergence’ debate has a rather optimistic premise. It rests on the assumption that once Asians do business on the same terms and in the same way as Westerners, not only do Westerners stand to gain more in terms of market share and profit, but they also get to speak more English and live in countries that look and feel more like their own.

Viewed through the prism of political culture and the dynamics of regionalism, the prospects for political change in Southeast Asia along a continuum which projects parity with the West, look bleak for now. So how optimistic can we be that commercially Southeast Asia is on a convergent course with the old industrialised states of Europe and North America? Perceptions vary. There are those who are confident that convergence is inevitable as the region engages with the global trading system, and falls in step with the global rules laid down by the new World Trade Organisation. Their optimism is only tempered by acceptance of the fact that this is not a goal countries in Southeast Asia can attain in a single leap. Protectionist or nationalist sentiment runs deep in a region where most economies were freely plundered by colonial powers until half a century ago.

As Thailand grappled with a new copyright law and pressure to open up its financial and service sector in accordance with the WTO rules, there were howls of protest from domestic companies fearing the competition. They lobbied the government to slacken the pace of liberalisation and attempted to move the goal posts — proposing, for example, that foreign stock brokers be limited to a 25 per cent share holding in Thai subsidiaries. Government officials also dragged their feet. They suspected that freer trade principally benefited foreigners. ‘The new rules are not made for foreigners to make money’, warned a senior official at Thailand’s new intellectual property department. ‘Ministers talk about liberalisation, but below them the senior officials are not supportive’, complained a Thai entrepreneur. Happily for Western software makers and foreign financial institutions, governments in the region resisted these protectionist pressures and stood firmly
behind policies of liberalisation. Clearly, they stood to lose a lot more by not adhering to GATT principles.

There are those who look at things differently, however. Malaysia’s Prime Minister Mahathir is of the view that free trade is fine so long as it is not practised to benefit the stronger trading nations. That’s why he wants to see Asian nations grouped together in an Asian trading forum—an insurance, if you like, against his suspicion that the West promotes free trade to erode the competitive advantages that Asia is blessed with. (He may also have been worried that Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia were in danger of losing some of these advantages as the cost of labour and other inputs increased.) The United States was not doing its best to dispel these fears when the Clinton administration chose to threaten Japan with trade sanctions over access to its auto market in mid-1995. America’s huge trade deficit with Japan pushed Washington into bypassing the newly created World Trade Organisation—confirming Mahathir’s suspicions about Western notions of free trade. Even less encouraging for the free marketers, was Mahathir’s decision in 1995 to implement its own trade watch-list—though quite how a net exporter could impose sanctions on its own markets remained unclear.

Meanwhile, the economic landscape of Southeast Asia has undergone a quiet but major shift over the past two decades. High levels of trade with traditional Western markets have shrunk in comparison with levels of trade within the region, and with the greater Asian region. In fact, lower trade barriers and open markets have worked in Asia’s favour. In the entire Asia-Pacific region, the percentage share of intraregional trade increased from 33.3 per cent in 1975 to 45.2 per cent in 1992. These economic realities coincided with, and have to some extent supported, the confidence with which Southeast Asian states have defended their political systems against an onslaught of criticism from the West. The point bears repeating, as it may be hard for some people to grapple with. The plain fact is that Southeast Asia’s more developed economies believe that they have secured a measure of self-reliance. By the year 2010, for example, a Japanese estimate puts Southeast Asia’s share of the world’s economy at 25 per cent—compared with 21 per cent for Europe and 27 per cent for North America.

The prospect, if not quite the reality, of economic self-reliance, is already breeding new political attitudes towards the West. When
the US congress voted to slash foreign aid in June 1995, a senior Philippine foreign ministry official observed: ‘Ten years ago we would have been wringing our hands; today we don’t really care because US aid is no longer so important to us.’ In 1991, the United States successfully blocked the appointment of a new Thai Prime Minister, Narong Wongwan, because he was suspected of involvement in narcotics smuggling. In 1995, when the State Department in Washington suggested that the appointment of cabinet ministers suspected of association with known narcotics dealers could impose a strain on bilateral ties, the incoming government of Banharn Silpa-archa reminded Washington that ‘Thailand was not a colony of the United States’. An opinion poll in Bangkok revealed that this nationalist stance was endorsed by a majority, and a subsequent government inquiry into the allegations was led by a former foreign minister, Thanat Khoman, known for his staunch anti-American views. Times had changed. A US embassy official in Bangkok noted that once Thailand’s exports to the ASEAN region overtook its exports to the United States in 1995/1996 ‘it won’t be so easy for us to influence the government here’. The official wistfully remembered the days when ‘all we needed to do was call up a general to get things done’.

However, just as Southeast Asia has found the self-confidence to speak with a regional voice, its economic security seemingly assured, a new uncertainty is looming on the horizon. The end of the Cold War destroyed the old bipolar world and laid the foundations for a new world order that is optimistically considered global in outlook. Such optimism may be misplaced. As Henry Kissinger notes in his recent study of diplomacy, the world is now too complex to fit a definitive order of any kind. And what if the world is on the verge of acquiring new polarities, also based on contrasting economic strengths and ways of managing society?

From a Southeast Asian perch, that’s just how China’s future role in the world is perceived. Few Southeast Asians subscribe to the comfortable notion that China’s massive potential as a superpower will be defused by a chaotic fragmentation of the state. According to former Thai prime minister Anand Panyarachun, ‘politically we regard China as a single nation, even if we tend to do business with 28 provinces’. Like the myth of convergence, the chaotic China scenario is sustained by those who feel threatened by China’s potential—one billion people living in an economy growing at 10 per cent a year. More realistically, since
95 per cent of the population are Han Chinese, Chinese cultural homogeneity can be considered a solid foundation for a national identity that could easily endure for another 2,000 years. Central authority has weakened in China (the central government’s share of fiscal revenue has declined from 80 per cent before 1979 to 43 per cent in 1993). But few China-watchers, at least in Southeast Asia, can really imagine the richer provinces identifying themselves with anything other than the idea of China. Even fewer predict that China will develop a liberal democratic political system any time soon. Certainly, no one in Southeast Asia can imagine a China doing business in a way that disadvantages China or the Chinese, and only a handful of businessmen in the region envisage China doing business in the foreseeable future the way they do on Wall Street.

Strategic perceptions of China as an incipient superpower have helped Southeast Asian states find more in common in the interest of bolstering the defence of sovereignty, as we saw above. Not everyone in Southeast Asia sees the emergence of a powerful China as necessarily a bad thing for the region’s well-being and security, however. Primarily, there are economic opportunities to be gained from access to the world’s largest single market. Diplomatically, ASEAN is positioning itself to act as a mediator or moderator, to help China deal with the rest of the world—with all the commercial and diplomatic quid pro quos this might entail. In the process, Southeast Asia’s traditional orientation towards the West is beginning to shift, swinging slowly and almost imperceptibly towards China—back towards China. ‘With the advent of Western power, we turned our backs on long historical ties with China and India’, reflects a Thai academic: ‘Now, because of the market and opening up of China, that age of pre-Western contact is coming back; and coming back in a big way.’

China has traditionally been viewed as a threat, but more ambivalently than that from the West. China’s influence on the region through the ages has been principally cultural and commercial. The region has received knowledge and commercial gain from China, as well as demands for suzerainty. Southeast Asia’s reaction to China has been ambivalent, compared to its ultimate reaction to European colonialism. This is because Chinese imperialism favoured indirect rule and preserved local sovereignty; Europeans eventually imposed direct rule on their Asian possessions. Arguably, this ambivalence will be felt again as
China begins to play a larger role in Southeast Asian affairs. ‘Thai society will adapt to aspects of China to balance Japan and the West’, believes a Thai law professor. Even more surprisingly, he added: ‘I would prefer to see China remain socialist to force our country’s politicians to think about social policies.’

Balance. The balancing of influences, views, and external forces, is the traditional hallmark of diplomacy in Southeast Asia. The syncretic impulse also lies at the core of Southeast Asian nationalism. ‘Do we the Indonesian nation...have only to choose between Pro-Russia or Pro-America?’, asked Indonesia’s founding vice-president Mohammad Hatta in 1948. He answered himself with a dictum that has so far served not just Indonesia but other countries in the region rather well in the post-colonial era:

The government is of the opinion that the position we should take is to avoid becoming an object in international conflicts but remain a subject who has the right to determine our own position and strive for our own objective.... Our struggle must be based on the old motto: self-reliance and struggle on the basis of our own ability.

The conventional view of the new global order is one that assumes the primacy of the West. But that’s not quite how the world is beginning to look from a Southeast Asian perspective. We began this survey of political change in Southeast Asia by examining contrasting models of leadership and how they have been challenged in a Western context. To close, let’s look at the next likely external influence these indigenous political orders will have to deal with—this time coming from the East—and gauge how easy it will be to maintain the self-reliance the region has managed quite well up till now.

ETHNIC CHINESE: THE COMMERCIAL GLUE OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

Southeast Asia’s longer-term economic security will depend less on foreign aid and export markets, and more on the ability of its entrepreneurs to generate capital and investment in the immediate neighbourhood. There may come a day when competitive pressures make the markets of Western countries and Japan less friendly for Southeast Asian businesses. At this point, the network
of corporate ties and industrial linkages between local businesses and their ability to find new sources of investment will become important assets sustaining the region’s growth. Singapore, one of the region’s most advanced economies, is already looking at ways to enhance regional linkages as a way of maintaining the momentum of economic growth. Helped by a healthy current account surplus and a government offering incentives to those investing overseas, ‘Singapore Inc.’ is moving offshore. The fact that most of these businessmen are ethnic Chinese moving into other countries where they can deal with ethnic Chinese, helps a great deal.

Clearly, the ethnic Chinese of Southeast Asia already have a distinctive advantage in this respect. Their networks, based on bonds of clan or kinship, span the region more effectively than any corporate system or web of bilateral ties could devise. To take just one example, one of the lesser known dialect groups in Southeast Asia hails from the Fuzhou prefecture in China’s Fujian Province. To other Chinese from this coastal area, they were looked down upon as country cousins. Yet as emigrants to the Malay archipelago and Indonesia, they have done remarkably well. In an arresting investigation of the Fuzhou network in Southeast Asia, veteran Asian Wall Street Journal reporter Raphael Pura discovered that the International Association of Fuzhous claims as members two of Asia’s wealthiest tycoons: Malaysian Robert Kuok, and Indonesian Liem Sioe Long. The head of Malaysia’s dominant ethnic Chinese political party is a Fuzhou; and the lucrative timber industry in Sarawak is dominated by Fuzhous.12

Ties like these are part of the human web that makes this region more integrated and interdependent than it often seems in either political or diplomatic terms. To cite Lee Kuan Yew on the subject:

People feel a kind of natural empathy for those who share their physical attributes. Their sense of closeness is reinforced when they also share basic culture and language. It makes for easy rapport and trust, which is the foundation for all business relations.13

Rapport and trust, not only among themselves but with their hosts, have enabled the ethnic Chinese to virtually dominate commerce in almost every Southeast Asian country. There
are approximately 23 million overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, representing about 5 per cent of the population. Yet, in most countries of Southeast Asia, the minority status of the ethnic Chinese is greatly magnified by the fact that they control large proportions of the economy. If their population in Indonesia amounts to less than 4 per cent of the population, it is estimated that Indonesian Chinese controlled 70 per cent of domestic capital in the mid-1980s. In Malaysia, the Chinese account for 37 per cent of the population and control 65 per cent of the economy. In the mid-1970s, Chinese in Thailand, representing less than 10 per cent of the population, owned 90 per cent of all investments in the commercial sector. One estimate of the total amount of capital controlled by the ethnic Chinese is in excess of US$ 85 billion. The top ethnic Chinese billionaires in Southeast Asia command a total net worth of around US$ 40 billion. ‘As a whole’, wrote the Japanese scholar Yoshihara Kunio, ‘Chinese capital seems to be a more important element of Southeast Asian capital than foreign capital.’

This web of ethnic, kinship, or simply business ties, has helped insulate Southeast Asia from external economic shocks. In future it may act as a conductor of political and cultural as well as corporate influence. Feeling more integrated and assimilated with their host cultures, the ethnic Chinese in some countries of Southeast Asia are slowly abandoning their traditional role as political financiers in the background, and have begun entering the political mainstream. In Thailand the traditional Chinese approach to politics was to contribute to all political parties. In the mid-1990s, successful Chinese corporate magnates like Thaksin Shinawatra, who built a successful telecommunications empire and a personal fortune of US$ 2 billion in a decade, were leading political parties and aiming for the prime minister’s office. Thaksin Shinawatra would not be the first Thai of Chinese descent to hold the office but he would represent the first of a group of Thai-Chinese who have built their political careers on the back of corporate activities which follow a traditionally Chinese cultural model.

In terms of political change, the trend towards more ethnic Chinese participation in government could well reinforce conservative political cultures. Reflecting the frugality and paternalistic tenor of ethnic Chinese corporate culture, the politics of someone like Thaksin boiled down to hard work and firm
There is also a strong belief that money and connections, rather than debate and popular consensus, is the key to problem-solving. In the 1995 general election in Malaysia, large numbers of Chinese voters in the largely Chinese state of Penang abandoned their traditional loyalties to the mainly Chinese opposition Democratic Action Party and voted for the Malay-dominated National Front ruling coalition. Here too, the level of comfort with the ruling establishment among Penang’s traditionally suspicious Hokkien community suggested that accommodation with the status quo was now preferable to dissent (although in a subsequent by-election in Penang, the DAP won a much increased majority).

Assimilation and integration have, over the past two decades, reduced the importance attached to the ethnic identity of the descendants of immigrant Chinese in the more advanced economies of the region. But integration has also bred confidence and, paradoxically, less passivity about being Chinese. Confidence has bred a new sense of pride in Chinese culture. ‘There is a new assertiveness among Chinese of the younger generation’, noted Indonesian scholar of Chinese origin, Mely Tan. ‘They are unencumbered by the baggage of the past. They say: we are Indonesians of Chinese descent. What’s the problem?’17 Echoing this sentiment in Thailand, a young professional comments that ‘these days it is chic to be Chinese’.

Another factor will reinforce this less passive Chinese identity — for rather practical reasons. With the rise of China as a major economic influence on Southeast Asia, it seems inevitable that ethnic Chinese who have spent the best part of half a century suppressing their ethnicity to integrate with their host societies, will begin to reverse that process in the interests of forging lucrative business ties with China. ‘In the past we learnt Chinese because it was the language of our ancestors’, suggests former Thai prime minister Anand Panyarachun. ‘Now we are learning Chinese because it is an important business language.’18

The role played by overseas Chinese investment in China is hard to measure; most of the key players are shy about disclosing their exposure to China for fear that it will upset host governments sensitive to capital flight. Official figures point to a predominance of ethnic Chinese capital, though. In 1994 China attracted US$ 33.8 billion in new foreign investment. Hongkong and Macau accounted for 70 per cent of this; Taiwan 8 per cent. By contrast,
the US and Japan weighed in with 7 per cent and 4 per cent respectively. A large number of Southeast Asia’s ethnic Chinese invest in China through companies in Hong Kong—although an increasing number are investing directly. Dhanin Chearavanont, the self-effacing president of Charoen Pokphand, Thailand’s largest conglomerate, won’t say how deeply the group is involved in China, but by 1995 the group had established joint-ventures in all but four of China’s provinces. From livestock rearing alone, the company earned US$ 3 billion a year. CP Group’s Chinese operations, concentrating mostly on its traditional expertise in livestock rearing and animal feed production, made Dhanin an important figure in China. He has developed good access to the Chinese leadership. So good, that in Thailand he is frequently asked about the future of China. Like that of his ethnic cousins in Indonesia and Malaysia, corporate mega-players Liem Sioe Long and Robert Kuok, the contribution Dhanin is making to China’s growth will almost certainly pay dividends once the Chinese economy takes off.

While some American and Japanese companies have experienced difficulties doing business in China, ethnic Chinese companies have managed to avoid many of the pitfalls. Partly this has been achieved by keeping their investment small and at the provincial level to avoid official scrutiny. But there is undoubtedly a degree of empathy with the Chinese authorities not enjoyed by non-Chinese companies. Charoen Pokphand executives, for instance, say that the Chinese authorities are happy to allow former civil servants to work for the company. This is how the Australian department of Foreign Affairs and trade summed up the advantage enjoyed by the ethnic Chinese in China:

Networks are essential to foreign Chinese success in China. They allow access to the right officials at the township or village level. Local officials also can introduce investors to officials in other townships. Benefits flow both ways through the networks. On the other side, established foreign-Chinese business people can introduce new potential investors to the township, and assist the governments of townships with investments and bank credit in Hong Kong and beyond.19

In political, and to some extent cultural terms, the descendants of poor peasants who fled the coast of China to work as coolies in
the great colonial cities of Southeast Asia may feel detached from the land of their ancestors. But whether they feel comfortable about this or not, they are poised to become the agents of a new era of commercial bonding with the great northern neighbour. According to a United Nations survey, the spectacular growth in China’s world-wide exports and its heavy concentration in the region has been a major factor in the growth of intraregional trade.\(^{20}\)

Intraregional trade is making Southeast Asia less dependent on Western markets, and therefore on the West as a political and strategic ally. Some economists in the region believe that much of this intraregional trade is driven less by policies and more by the higher incomes and investment opportunities generated by the private sector—which is dominated by ethnic Chinese.\(^{21}\)

The impact of China’s economic clout in the region, has potentially far more than just commercial or economic implications. For ethnic Chinese this is a sensitive issue; it begins to make them less a population of ‘overseas Chinese’, but rather Chinese who happen to be overseas. Intellectuals dream of one Southeast Asia; but might the region’s future more realistically be wedded to another thousand years of China’s influence? The former Indonesian foreign minister Mochtar Kusumaatmadja reminds us that China’s influence in Southeast Asia ‘will always be cultural— never military in nature’.\(^{22}\) How this affects the course of political change is a matter for speculation; but one worth exploring.

**CHINA: RE-ENTER THE DRAGON**

Supapohn Kanwerayotin, a thirty-something Thai professional, remembers going to her Chinese primary school and being taught the *teochiou* Chinese dialect secretly. The teachers made them come to school around seven in the morning. They would hand out text books covered in brown or orange paper. The children could never take these books home, and they were carefully collected after class. Sometimes, for no given reason, the morning language class was abruptly cancelled. Although she was not aware then, Supapohn now knows this was because of a government school inspection. Teaching Chinese 25 years ago was frowned upon in Thailand. How things have changed. Today Supapohn is thinking of taking a job in China because, ‘Thai-
Chinese willing to work in China have a guaranteed job with the big Thai-Chinese conglomerates’.23

In the foregoing discussion, many of the assumptions about the course of political change were based on the weighting given to Western power and influence in the region. But what if this changes in the next half century? It is worth re-emphasising that from a Southeast Asian perspective, European influence has been but an interlude of effectively no more than 200 years, interrupting the much longer tradition of cultural and political influence exercised by China.

What kind of China emerges from the Deng era is of intense interest to Southeast Asians who feel, correctly, that it will affect their future too. In simple terms, a weak Chinese state, abandoning control to provincial kingpins, will offer tremendous business opportunities—as it did in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Qing dynasty. A weaker China might also encourage adventurism by China’s neighbouring powers—as it did in the 1930s—and that could be destabilising for the region as a whole. A strong, unified China, on the other hand, will sustain its control over society, and maintain a forward diplomatic posture in the region. Both these aspects of a strong unified China could help strengthen the prevailing political culture in Southeast Asia and forestall convergence with Western standards of political and commercial behaviour.

For the purposes of this discussion, let us assume that China becomes, as is widely predicted, the world’s largest economy by the year 2010. Economic growth marches along at a healthy clip of 10 per cent annually; the current account deficit remains comparatively low; yet China’s market continues to open. The most important impact of an emergent China scenario will be on the Southeast Asian ethnic Chinese population. The conventional wisdom is that after almost half a century of steady assimilation with their host cultures, the region’s ethnic Chinese have lost whatever bonds they had with the country of their ancestors. But this widely held view is being challenged by the emergence of China as an important regional market. China’s market is said to be luring the Chinese Diaspora ‘homeward’. Pragmatism has once again overruled the emotional ties of place and culture—this time to reverse or at least arrest the assimilation process. The general assumption, regardless of politically-correct statements periodically made by ethnic Chinese themselves, is that the Chinese of
Southeast Asia are almost becoming even more Chinese, rediscovering their ethnic identity to exploit opportunities in China. Ahead of Indonesia’s normalisation of relations with China in 1990, a move that greatly facilitated China’s diplomatic push into Southeast Asia, Mely Tan feared that it would remind Indonesian Chinese ‘of their own problem, that they are a foreign element in the country’. George Hicks and Jamie Mackie wrote in mid-1994: ‘It may be excessive to suggest that we are now entering a phase of re-sinicisation, but it may well be that the phase of rapid de-sinicisation has ended.’

It would be premature, and perhaps wrong, to predict any racial tension in the region as a result of a Chinese ethnic revival. However it can perhaps be safely said that China’s influence over its ethnic emigrants has ebbed and flowed, but never really been extinguished. The declining Qing imperial dynasty, with its disdainful regard for emigrants, was reason enough for many Chinese to turn their backs on the homeland. But a politically resurgent China after 1911 sparked off a wave of pro-Beijing sentiment among Southeast Asia’s Chinese community. If Deng’s reforms and the flowering of China’s market economy is once again restoring pride in China among the Chinese Diaspora, what will the implications be for Southeast Asia?

First, Western political and economic influence in Southeast Asia will increasingly find itself checked by China’s sheer size and influence. Intangible as this may seem while the Beijing leadership struggles to rein in unruly provincial fiefdoms and cope with managing its market reforms, just consider the influx of Chinese immigrant workers—now over 100,000 illegally in Thailand; or the trade in cheap Chinese consumer products flooding Burma, and knocking at Thailand’s door. In Burma’s second city of Mandalay the visitor is assailed with complaints by local Burmese traders. ‘We are treated as second class citizens in our own country’, complained a retired Muslim schoolteacher, referring to the special treatment given Chinese businessmen by the city authorities. If not a deliberate policy, China’s probing of markets to the south on mainland Southeast Asia could easily help extend Chinese commercial influence. Cross border trade between Yunnan and Burma is estimated at an annual US$ 1.5 billion. A new corridor of trade with Southeast Asia is developing through Northern Laos, where the Chinese have been building a road link through to Thailand. Former prime minister Anand has publicly
called for the old buffer states, that were designed to keep China at bay, to be turned into ‘bridges’ carrying commerce and trade.

Second, China’s cultural influence in Southeast Asia is steadily growing and may be rather more important in the long run than the build-up of Chinese military strength. The process is subtle, and also rather sensitive in some countries. The need to do business with China is fuelling demand for Mandarin speakers in Thailand, for example. Enrolment in Mandarin classes increased by 30 per cent at Bangkok’s Thammasat University from 1993 to 1994. Yet a dozen or so years before, Thai-Chinese were more furtive about learning the language of their ancestors; one of the few schools where Mandarin could be learnt was tucked away in the hills of northern Thailand in a community of former Kuomintang soldiers. ‘The revival of Chinese studies in Thailand can be attributed to the fact that China, whose economy is ranked third largest in the world, has raised its doors to the world’, commented a local Thai newspaper.26

Western diplomats are often confused because China’s political profile hardly reflects the importance of its cultural and commercial ties—and perhaps also because they are convinced that a resurgent China will play by the global rules. Officially, China plays a low-key diplomatic role. Chinese embassies are mostly tucked away in the less fancy parts of town. Their diplomats maintain a low profile. Whenever senior Chinese officials visit the region, they are careful to stress China’s policy towards people of Chinese origin: never to endorse dual nationality. ‘As they are no longer Chinese nationals, they should fulfil their obligations to the country’, intoned Chinese premier Li Peng during a visit to Jakarta in 1991. Yet Chinese embassy receptions draw thousands of the well-heeled and well-connected within the business community. In an address marking the twentieth anniversary of ties between Bangkok and Beijing in July 1995, the Chinese ambassador remarked that HRH Princess Maha Cakri Sirindhorn had made no less than six visits to China. In 1994, the Thai-Chinese Chamber of Commerce played host to a remarkable 278 investment missions from China. In Malaysia, the local Chinese business community pays the expenses of visiting Chinese provincial officials. Datuk Tan Gim Wah, the mayor of Penang, complained that it is often hard to keep up with the expensive tastes of Chinese officials. He has known local businessmen buy more expensive cars just to impress a Chinese official visitor.27
Even more subtle than China’s official diplomatic thrust in the region, is its cultural diplomacy. When the Chinese government sent a holy Buddhist relic to Thailand in 1994, the Thai King prayed at the temple where the relic, said to be a tooth of the Lord Buddha, was temporarily installed. In Burma, another Buddhist relic from China sent the same year attracted throngs of devout Buddhists and the donation of many hundreds of thousands of dollars. Little by little, and for the most part without fanfare, China is finding common cultural meeting points to enhance its relations with Southeast Asia. ‘We have enjoyed friendly contacts for 1,000 years’, Li Peng reminded his Indonesian hosts in 1991, usefully adding that ‘both of our countries underwent periods of colonial turmoil’. Here’s how a Chinese academic reflected on China’s claim to the South China Sea, by boldly claiming a common identity in the region:

Countries and regions around this area have one of the fastest rates of economic growth in the world…. These countries and regions have their common interests and requirements, similar human backgrounds, and close links in history.28

Another Chinese academic quietly reminded the author about the tradition of maritime trade existing between China and Southeast Asia. ‘You Europeans have your Magellans and Cooks, but you forget our own Admiral Cheng Ho’, he quipped.29 Where the great European navigators left little other than maps and place names, Cheng Ho, a Muslim eunuch of the Ming Dynasty led half a dozen expeditions to Southeast Asia in the early fifteenth century. His fleet consisted of over 60 ships and some 27,000 men. By all accounts, the admiral’s repeated missions to the princely courts of Southeast Asia did much to repair the damage to China’s image done by Kublai Khan’s marauding Mongol invasions at the end of the thirteenth century. Cheng Ho’s contribution, not to say his influence, must have been considerable. For outside the central Javanese capital of Semarang, there still stands a Chinese temple dedicated to the memory of Cheng Ho. Another shrine exists in the east coast state of Trenggannu in Malaysia. Indonesian Chinese revere the Surabaya shrine. But more remarkably, Cheng Ho, a Muslim Chinese, is also believed to have played a role in helping
Islamic missionaries convert the Hindu rulers of fifteenth-century Java.\textsuperscript{30}  
A Muslim Chinese helping to spread Islam in the fifteenth century; a modern Chinese government propagating the Buddhist faith at the end of the twentieth century. The effectiveness of China’s cultural diplomacy has not lost much over the past 500 years. These cultural exports may not be as noticeable as a Michael Jackson concert tour, or another McDonalds restaurant but they draw a much deeper response. Anwar Ibrahim from Malaysia reads his history well when he speaks of the ties between the old Malay sultanates and the Ming Dynasty in the fifteenth century. And in one sentence, perhaps instinctively, he captures the essence of what drove China’s engagement with the region then, and, in the author’s view, what is very likely to be the engine of China’s much closer engagement in the future: Trade, rather than war, was the governing mode of relations.\textsuperscript{3}

The world has changed, of course. There will never be a hermetically sealed Asia revolving around the Middle kingdom of China as the mandarin scholars once fancied. There may even be a counter-reaction to a more assertive China; one that sees Southeast Asia look to the West for a strategic and cultural balance. But for now, it looks like China’s growing influence in the region will help balance the perception that the rest of the world is on a convergent course with Western values. The closer integration of Southeast Asian states, and in turn with other East Asian states, principally China, will finally exorcise the ghost of Max Weber from the intellectual conceptualisation of the region’s political culture.

The rhetoric of Southeast Asia’s cultural renaissance has struggled to combat the notion that non-Western cultures are ill-equipped to progress economically or politically. It’s ironic, that just as the proponents of Asian values began to turn the corner in the debate, by toning down their own distorted claims of primacy, and accepting more of the universal values enshrined in every one of the world’s cultures, some of the pillars of Western virtue in Asia began to crumble. In early 1995, the US dollar lost 15 per cent of its value against the Japanese Yen, and former US defence secretary Robert Macnamara admitted that as early as 1963, he knew that America’s engagement in Vietnam was a mistake. Do these symbolic markers signal an impending end to the Western interlude in Asia? Writing in mid-1995, Don Emmerson, an American scholar of Asian affairs, considered the future possibility
that: ‘Despite its geographic status as a Pacific power, the United States became a disadvantaged bystander on the rim, reduced to relying on Canada and Latin America in [a] tensely tripolar world…’. 31

The argument in this book has focused on the ways Southeast Asian countries have preserved, recovered, and adapted traditional models of political power in the face of external pressure to change from the West. In the final pages the possibility has been raised that another, perhaps more familiar external cultural influence may prevail over the next few decades. But then it has always been the fate of Southeast Asia to serve as a crossroads of culture and trade. The beauty of this phenomenon has always been the diverse manner in which the impact of East and West has been felt. Like the mosques of the north Java coast where Hindu rites blend with Islamic orthodoxy, and a Muslim saint can be buried in a tomb alongside his Chinese wife. Or the Cao Dai church in Vietnam, which blends Taoist spiritualism and Christian dogma. This colourful, if sometimes baffling, eclecticism may cloud the political picture and confuse those interested in divining principles of governance, but it should alert the objective observer to a collective allergy to extremism and disdain for dogma. In a world afflicted by both, perhaps the region offers an example worth emulating.
Notes

Any quotations from individuals, not otherwise referenced, are personal communications to the author, and of course I take full responsibility for their accuracy, for the reliability of data quoted, and for the opinions expressed here.

PROLOGUE

2 Author’s interview with Amnuay Virawan, Bangkok, June 1995.
6 The pioneering work on ethnicity in Southeast Asia was done by Edmund Leach in his Political Systems of Highland Burma (1954) London: Bell.
8 Author’s interview with Dhanin Chearavanont, Bangkok, November 1994.


1

RECOVERING TRADITION

5 ibid., p. 486.
6 ibid.


15 In 1994, Rupert Murdoch’s Hong Kong-based Star Television network replaced the US-owned Music Television (MTV) with a regionally-produced version called ‘V’. MTV had been a source of considerable criticism from governments in the region because of its brash, Western style. ‘V’, by contrast, brought audiences more Asian pop music, and toned down the presentation.


18 ibid.


22 The survey was conducted by Dr Suvid Rungvisai of Chiang Mai University in the first five months of 1995. Personal communication, June 1995.

23 In 1992 and 1993, the author covered parliamentary by-elections in Kedah and Kelantan, which involved contests between the ruling UMNO party and the Islamic party (PAS).

24 George Yeo, cited in *Straits Times*, 20 December 1993.


28 Herb Feith, op. cit., p. 313.
30 Author’s interview with Nurcholis Madjid, Jakarta, April 1994.
32 ibid., p. 371.
37 Author’s interview with a senior UMNO politician, Kuala Lumpur, 27 April 1994.
38 Personal communication, May 1994.
40 Federal Constitution of Malaysia, Article 150(1).
48 *FEER*, 31 August 1995.

2

**DEUS EX IMPERA**

1 Jomo Sundaram, cited in *FEER*, 4 May 1995.
In the late 1980s, Mahathir was infuriated by court judgments which overturned the expulsion of two foreign journalists from the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, and then ordered the release of an opposition politician under detention. In 1988, he amended the constitution so that, in his words, judges ‘would apply the law made in parliament and not make their own laws…’. Then in May 1988 the Lord President (Chief Justice) and two Supreme Court judges were dismissed after a judicial enquiry on the grounds of ‘gross misconduct’ ahead of a controversial challenge in court lodged by a dissident faction of UMNO which they were scheduled to rule on. An amendment to the Printing and Presses and Licensing Act limits press licences to a renewable one year period. See Harold Crouch (1992) ‘Authoritarian Trends, the UMNO Split and the Limits of Power’, in Joel Kahn and Francis Loh Kok Wah (eds) *Fragmented Vision: Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia*, Sidney: Allen and Unwin, pp. 26–7.


13 A controversy rages in Thai historical circles over whether the famed Ramkhamhaeng Inscription genuinely dates back to the thirteenth century, or was concocted by King Rama IV of Thailand to support his notion of how Thai society should be conceived.


18 *The Times* [of London], 23 December 1993.


21 Indonesia’s 4 million civil servants were under an ‘unwritten obligation to support only the ruling Golkar Party in elections’. Comment by Secretary General of Home Affairs Ministry, Suryatna, cited in the *Straits Times* [of Singapore], 1 December 1993.


24 Story as related to the author by Fikri Jufri, deputy editor of *Tempo* magazine in 1992.


26 Author’s interview with Sarwono Kusumaatmadja, Jakarta, 26 September 1990.

27 Shahnon Ahmad’s short story was published in Kuala Lumpur in the literary magazine *Dewan Sastera* in December 1993. Shortly afterwards, the magazine’s editor Abdul Ahmad was moved to another position allegedly at Mahathir’s request.


31 Personal communication.

32 Personal communication, July 1992.

33 Personal communication, September 1992.

34 Mahathir’s assault on the courts in 1988 was widely reported. It revolves around the 27 May 1988 dismissal of the Lord President (highest judge in the land) Tun Salleh Abbas. Tun Salleh had been hearing an appeal by a group of political dissidents who questioned the legality of Mahathir’s ruling UMNO party. Following Tun Salleh’s dismissal, Mahathir told the annual UMNO assembly in October: ‘What is so special about judges in Malaysia that they are
considered to be above the law?" In January 1988 the attorney general Abu Talib Othman echoed Mahathir’s impatience with the independence of the judiciary by saying ‘independence of the court does not necessarily mean deciding a case against the state’. (All cited in Khoo Boo Teik (1995) *Paradoxes of Mahathirism*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, pp. 292–3.)


39 ibid., p. 287.

40 *FEER*, 5 July 1990.


43 Indonesia’s State secretary, Moerdiono, cited in *Tempo*, 8 January 1994, p. 16.

### 3 DIFFERING ON DEMOCRACY

1 Tran Quang Co, a senior Vietnamese foreign ministry official, speaking at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies Round Table, Kuala Lumpur, June 1994.


5 ibid., p. 486.

6 Smith (1968) op. cit., p. 187.

7 ibid., p. 185.

8 *FEER*, 2 December 1993.

9 Paper delivered at a seminar on human rights in Indonesia, organised by the Center of Strategic and International Studies, Jakarta, May 1993.

NOTES

14 Tran Quang Co in Kuala Lumpur, June 1994 (see note 1, p. 217).
16 Mahathir, speech, 5 December 1993.
26 Author’s interview with Anwar Ibrahim, 26 May 1994.
30 The *Straits Times*, 9 December 1993.
32 ibid., p. 47.
33 Cited in the *Straits Times*, 12 May 1991.
34 Mahathir’s speech at *International Herald Tribune* Conference in Kuala Lumpur, 15 November 1993
36 Personal communications.
40 Cited in the *Straits Times*, 14 August 1991.

4 CORE VALUES OR ELITIST CORES

2 Antonio Galvao (c.1544) *A Treatise on the Moluccas*, St. Louis: Jesuit Historical Institute.
4 Personal communication.
5 Personal communication, May 1995.
6 Personal communication, July 1995.
7 Personal communication, July 1994.
8 Amnuay Virawan, addressing a lunch in honour of Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, sponsored by Chulalongkorn University’s Institute of Strategic and International Studies, Bangkok, 21 September 1994.
9 Sukhumbhand Paribatra addressing ISIS luncheon for Anwar Ibrahim, 21 September 1994.
10 Author’s interview with Brigadier General David Abel in Rangoon, 15 January 1995.
12 Personal communication, May 1995.
13 Personal communication, May 1995.
14 Personal communication, Jakarta 1991.
16 Personal communication, April 1995.
17 Author’s interviews with foreign and Thai NGOs in Bangkok, October 1994.
19 The author who penned these remarks, Bilahari Kausikan, was appointed Singapore’s permanent representative to the United Nations in 1995. As a delegate of the Singapore Ministry of Foreign
Affairs he issued this statement at the World Conference on Human
Rights, Regional Meeting for Asia, Bangkok, 31 March 1993.
20 *Straits Times* [of Singapore], March 5 1994.
21 Interview with Malaysian rock artist Zainal Abidin, in *Mens Review*,
May 1993.
25 Personal communication, July 1995.
26 Author’s interview with Sheikh Imam Ashaari Mohamad,
27 In August 1994, Arqam was banned by the Malaysian government.
Ashaari was extradited from Thailand and placed in detention. He
later denounced his own teachings and appealed to other Arqam
members to return to society.
28 *Indonesia 50 Years after Independence: Stability and Unity in a
Rights and Development, Bangkok, p. 113.
29 Widely reported in Jakarta and personal communication to the
author.
30 Author’s interview with Liew Chen Chuan, editor of the Chinese
31 Author’s interview with Lim Heng Jim, managing director of
Quantum, a hard-disk factory in Penang, November 1993.
32 Andrew Macintyre (1990) *Business and Politics in Indonesia*,
Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
33 Benny Subianto (1992) ‘The Indonesian Middle Class and the Idea
of Democracy’, paper presented at the Conference on Indonesian
Democracy 1950s and 1990s, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies,
Monash University, 17–20 December.
34 Morton Abramowitz (1993) a paper presented at the Institute of
Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, 25th anniversary, 30 August.
35 Chai-anan Samudavani (1994) ‘Bypassing the State’, draft paper
in the possession of the author.

5

THE RELIGIOUS CHALLENGE TO AUTHORITY

1 The author is indebted to Ike Ong for this point.
2 Personal communication, July 1995.
3 Rudolph Mrazek (1994) *Sjahrir: Politics and Exile in Indonesia*,
5 The Hanoi government insists that all religious and social organisations belong to a state backed umbrella group called the Fatherland Front. The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, which claims to be the sole legitimate Buddhist church of Vietnam, has refused to join.
9 Author’s interview with M.R.Sukhumbhand Paribatra and M.R. Ruchaya Abhakol.
10 Author’s interview with Surin Pitsuwan, Bangkok, 29 September 1994.
12 Personal communication with a Malay stockbroker in Kuala Lumpur, May 1994.
15 *Tempo*, 16 April 1994.
16 By doing so he upset local forestry officials and the police. In December 1994, Phra Prajak gave up his struggle to protect the forest, and left the monkhood under what press reports said were mysterious circumstances. Rumours abounded that he was a conman; but many suspected that he was the victim of a powerful blend of business and political interests behind the logging operation in the area.
20 Author’s interview with Anwar Ibrahim, Kuala Lumpur, June 1994.
22 Author’s interview with General Chavalit Yodhmani, Bangkok, April 1995.
24 Tourabi opted to collaborate with the military junta of Jaffar Noumeri. I am grateful to K.S. Jomo for making this point.
25 Personal communication, Bangkok 1995.
27 Author’s interview with Thaksin Shinawatra, Bangkok, June 1995.
29 Kuntowidjoyo’s speech in Malang, East Java, at the inauguration of Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia (Association of Muslim intellectuals) (ICMI), December 1990.
30 Personal communication.
33 Author’s interview with Nurcholis Madjid, Jakarta, 30 April 1994.
34 Personal communication, 1991.
36 Author’s interview with Nurcholis Madjid, Jakarta, 30 April 1994.
37 Author’s interview with Alyamsyah Ratu Prawinegara, Malang, December 1990.
38 Author’s interview with Amien Rais, Malang, December 1990.
39 Author’s interview with senior Indonesian staff officer, Kuala Lumpur, 10 June 1994.
40 Author’s interview with Adi Sasono, Jakarta, May 1994.
42 Mahathir speech, Kuala Lumpur, 14 September 1993.
44 Rehman Rashid, op. cit., p. 115.
45 Author’s interview with Fadyl Noor, October 1993.
46 Document from Institut Kajian Dasar, a think-tank set up under the patronage of Anwar Ibrahim in 1993.
47 Author’s interview with Marzuki Darusman, Jakarta, May 1994.
48 Author’s interview with Abdurrahman Wahid, Jakarta, May 1994.
49 Author’s interview with Nurcholis Madjid, Jakarta, April 1994.
52 Author’s interview with Nurcholis Madjid, Jakarta, April 1994.

COMING TOGETHER
1 Author’s interview with Witoon, Bangkok, August 1994.
2 The proposal was made by Thai foreign minister Kasem Kasemsiri at the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Brunei, July 1995.
4 Views gathered from residents of Chiangmai during the author’s doctoral research in Chiangmai, 1981–3.
6 ibid.
7 Author’s interview with Jose Almonte, National Security Advisor to the President of the Philippines, 4 September 1995.
12 Dewi Anwar, op. cit., p. 5.
13 Personal communication, Bangkok, May 1995.
17 Personal communication, Bangkok.
20 Sarasin Viraphol in his (1977) Tribute and Profit: Sino Siamese Trade 1652–1853 showed how Siamese tribute to China was driven more by the fact that tributary trade was exempt from duty rather than any acknowledgment of China’s sovereignty over Siam. (Cambridge. Mass.: Harvard University Press, p. 244).
22 Author’s interview with Dhanin Chearavanont, December 1994.
23 Figures from Hicks and Mackie in FEER, 14 July 1994.
24 Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1995.
27 Gerald Segal (1990) op. cit., p. 389.
29 Personal communication.
30 Personal communication.
32 Pan Qi (1985) ‘Opening the Southwest: An Expert Opinion’, Beijing Review, no. 35, 2 September, pp. 22–3. (I am indebted to Bertil Lintner for bringing this article to my attention.)
33 Personal communication.
36 Shared Destiny: Southeast Asia in the Twenty-first Century: Report of the ASEAN-Vietnam Study Group, February 1993. The report, which contained a section titled ‘A Vision for Southeast Asia’, was a dry run for the Manila declaration a year later, and was put together by the same group.
37 The author is indebted to Kavi Chongkittavorn for this point.
38 Author’s interview with Jose Almonte, 4 September 1995.
39 Personal communication, Honolulu, September 1995.

EPILOGUE

2 Interview with Lt. Suchai Jaosividha, director general of the intellectual property department, Bangkok, 24 May 1995.
5 Personal communication, June 1995.
6 Personal communication, April 1995.
8 Anand Panyarachun, keynote address at a seminar marking 20 years of Thailand’s diplomatic ties with China, Bangkok, 1 July 1995.
9 Author’s interview with Professor Umporn, Panachet, 13 September 1995.
10 Personal communication with member of the Law faculty of Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, April 1995.
11 Excerpted from speech by Mohammad Hatta before the national committee of Indonesia, 2 September 1948.
13 Speech by Lee Kuan Yew at the Second World Enterprise Convention, Hong Kong, 22 November 1993.
15 Overseas Chinese Business Networks in Asia (1995) Report of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Canberra, p. 120.
17 Author’s interview with Mely Tan, Jakarta, 6 August 1990.
18 Author’s interview with Anand Panyarachun, July 1995.
19 Overseas Chinese Business Networks in Asia, op. cit., p. 204.
21 Author’s interviews with Dr Niphol Poapongsakorn and Dr Wisarn Pupphavesa, Thailand Development and Research Institute, Bangkok, July 1995.
23 Personal communication, Bangkok.
25 Personal communication, January 1995 in Mandalay.
26 Bangkok Post, 12 April 1995.
27 Personal communication, Penang, November 1993.


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