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Political Corruption and Insecurity in Southeast Asia

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CRISTIAN VADUVA, MAR 26 2014

Scholars all over the world agree that Southeast Asia is not an easy region for academic research, although it is one of the most intriguing. Starting from the economical “Asian miracle” through the arguable “Asian values” and finishing with a different worldview in regards to things that matter, Southeast Asia becomes one of the most discussed regions of the world in the academic literature. The intention of this essay is to exclusively focus on domestic security issues in the region—more specifically, the causes of domestic insecurity created by political corruption. This paper will argue that political corruption in Southeast Asia is an important threat to domestic security. To sustain this argument, the essay will take into consideration three main points. Firstly, the reader will be introduced to the main causes for political parties’ corruption in some academic literature. Secondly, the way that political corruption creates insecurity will be taken into consideration. Finally, the paper asserts that external factors added to political corruption are to be considered also an important threat to domestic security.

Certainly corruption is not a popular topic for the academic research since it includes practices enlisted as crimes (Berlinski 2009, 74). As Berlinski (2009, 74) argues, like all crimes, corruption is difficult to study because those in trouble are not willing to cooperate for an explanation of the phenomenon. The concept of corruption is an essentially contested one. In other words, there is no generally agreed academic definition (Lim and Stern 2002, 19). In the academic literature, the word “corruption” has been used in different ways, with different connotations depending on the context (Kuncoro 2006, 11). In the economic context, the most commonly-used definition is “the use of public office for private gain” (Shleifer and Vishny cited in Kuncoro 2006, 11). The problem arises from the fact that there is not a clear distinction between economic and political corruption (Kuncoro 2006, 11). Given its definitional vagueness, it is easy to understand why the general impact of corruption it is not clear-cut, either in the economic or the political realm.

However, academics agree that in a democratic society, the party system and political parties play the most important role in consolidating democracy (Quimpo 2007, 286). In this way, corruption in the political system can be understood as a major issue for a democratic society. Taking into consideration five of the most important countries in the Southeast Asia as Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, an interesting fact comes to the shore. Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia, which just recently started their democratic way of life after long periods of military rule, are considered the most corrupt amongst the developing countries (Lim and Stern 2002, 20). On the other hand, Malaysia and Singapore are considered among the least corrupt, despite the fact that their governments had considerable interventions in their economies (Lim and Stern 2002, 20). In this way, the slow process of building a new democracy seems to be the trigger of corruption and its causes.

What are the main causes of political corruption in Southeast Asia? Some scholars argue that in some cases, as in Indonesia, a link between culture and corruption in general seems to be found. Taking into consideration the work of Indonesia scholar Benedict Anderson, Hadiz (2004, 211) suggests that in the Javanese culture, the fact that power holders had great wealth obtained through more or less ethical methods is never an issue. Other scholars argue that corruption is a cultural fact, as a way of life, included in the arguable concept of “Asian values” (Wilson and Steenbergen 2013). However, some empirical studies and realities in the field contradict this argument, pointing out a strong public resentment against it (Hadiz 2004, 211).

Political parties are considered to be the most corrupt institutions in Indonesia, and this bias seems to be confirmed

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by a large number of corruption cases against politicians at any level (Mietzner 2007, 239). Mietzner finds that two different approaches have been used by scholars to explain this phenomenon. Firstly, there is the neo-Marxist approach, which frames political parties and their leaders as simply representatives of local and global capitalist interests, where they are just “part of the struggle of oligarchic elites to hijack democratic institutions and perpetuate the capitalist system” (Mietzner 2007, 239). Secondly, the so-called “assumption of self-interested utility” approach sees politicians as human beings fighting for their own survival, building up their wealth and power through political parties as rolling vehicles (Mietzner 2007, 239).

Mietzner, however, argues that scholars have missed an important cause in explaining political corruption in Indonesia: the causal relationship between the massive decrease in state funding for political parties and the increase in high costs of holding and maintaining the political offices (Mietzner 2007, 239). Because the era of mass political parties in Indonesia came to an end in the 1970s, the membership fees and small contributions made by their supporters was simply not enough for parties to survive in a market economy. Most of the political parties' income was provided by state subsidies and business corporations contributions (Mietzner 2007, 240). In this way, some scholars have drawn a connection between political corruption and the small amount of state subsidies (Mietzner 2007, 241).

Thus it can be argued that political corruption creates insecurity. It is important to take into consideration the way in which security is defined and analysed (Wilson and Steenbergen 2013). A significant challenge posed by corruption is economic security, which is an important part of the broader human security approach (*ibid*). Human security is a concept built on the liberal assumption of basic personal rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (Claude and Weston et al, cited in Williams 2008, 281). In this way, human security could be defined as “the absence of threats to various core human values, including the most basic human value, the physical safety of the individual” (Williams 2008, 282). Clearly economic insecurity represents a threat to the physical safety of an individual, which is why it is included in the human security approach.

In terms of the argument that political corruption creates insecurity, one can see an obvious link between the “shock waves of protest and repression”, especially in Southeast Asia, created by politics rather than by economics (Slater 2013, 9). As Slater (2013) argues, this phenomenon was more evident in urban eruptions, which were not economic but political, contrary to conventional knowledge (Slater 2013, 3). In Indonesia and Malaysia, for example, ordinary citizens saw “corruption, collusion, and nepotism” as a political, governmental abuse, and they united in massive anti-government uprisings (Slater 2013, 4). Another suggestive example can be found in Thailand, where the “Yellow Shirts” movement erupted as a response to the perceived corrupt behaviour of Thaksin Shinawatra, the prime minister at the time (Slater 2013, 6).

Another suggestive example is the rise of *clientelistic* parties in the Philippines. The so-called *trapo* parties, using political corruption as a way of life, became “instruments of an oligarchic elite for the predation of the state and its resources through various means—the use of traditional patron-client ties . . . rent-seeking, outright corruption, fraud, coercion and violence” (Quimpo 2007, 278). The corruption, fraud and violence in Philippines at the time became known as the three Gs : “guns, goons, and gold” (Quimpo 2007, 280). Moreover, Quimpo, taking into consideration Paul Hutchcroft's work, points out the fact that Philippines in the 70s was a weak state “plundered by different factions of the elite”, and the symbiotic interaction between the state, its government, and rent-seeking political families weakened the state's resources and its institutions (Quimpo 2007, 282).

Similarly, external factors added to political corruption have also played an important role in weakening of key state institutions in Southeast Asia. One of the most important factors is external contributions from companies and individuals as a form of financing political parties (Mietzner 2007, 249). If political parties or politicians are elected to public office or are already in the position, they are expected to take into consideration the clearly defined political and economic interests of those contributors (Mietzner 2007, 249). Thus, in exchange, political parties or politicians will support particular policies or legislation that these contributors are looking for (Mietzner 2007, 249). As an example, in Indonesia wealthy companies and individuals contribute substantially to the financing of the New Order's political apparatus, securing mining and oil projects, trade monopolies, and easy access to credit from the state's banks (Mietzner 2007, 249). In this way, external factors added to political corruption are to be considered an

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important threat to domestic security because of the simple fact that in some Southeast Asian countries, political parties “have effectively begun to surrender some of their political functions in exchange for vital financial assistance” (Mietzner 2007, 251).

What can be done? Is political corruption, or corruption generally speaking, an unending “disease”? In the Southeast Asia region, Singapore has largely been studied as a leader in fighting corruption. These studies concluded that in Singapore a “genuine commitment on the part of political leaders to combat the phenomenon” can be found (Ho and Quah cited in Abdulai 2009, 388). In this way, there seems to be a general consensus in the academic literature that a strong political will is the main component for a successful anti-corruption campaign (Williams and Doig et al, cited in Abdulai 2009, 390). On the other hand, a genuine and comprehensive legal framework that identifies and proscribes corrupt practices must be developed (Jones 2009, 155). Furthermore, the establishment of well-coordinated accountability institutions that can carry out watchdog, enforcement, and judicial functions must be also taken into consideration (Jones 2009, 156).

Moreover, another way to combat the political corruption phenomenon is to build new political parties that are genuine reform-seekers, with clear and honest politicians (Quimpo 2007, 289). As Quimpo (2007) argues, in the Philippines’s *trapo* parties, not everyone is corrupt. Thus, reform-seeker politicians have the choice to consider getting out of these “sick” environment and actively work in truly democratic parties or building new political parties (Quimpo 2007, 290). Another available solution, more or less arguable, seems to be that state funding of political parties looks like the best option to maintain their proper independence and professionalism (Mietzner 2007, 241).

In conclusion, this essay has argued that political corruption in Southeast Asia is an important threat to domestic security. To sustain this argument, this essay has taken into consideration three main points. Firstly, the reader was introduced to the main causes for political parties’ corruption in some academic literature. Secondly, the way that political corruption creates insecurity was taken into consideration. Finally, the paper asserted that external factors added to political corruption are to be considered an important threat to domestic security. Much more needs to be done in this research area until final answers come to the shore.

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