

Book review: Cherian George, Gayathry Venkiteswaran: Media and Power in Southeast Asia

Priyadharna, Subekti

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Although the book is currently only available in Japanese, students of Southeast Asia Studies who do not read Japanese can benefit from the bibliography as a guide to local references. Furthermore, it can serve as a platform for future collaboration with Japanese scholars.

Jafar Suryomengolo

CHERIAN GEORGE / GAYATHRY VENKITESWARAN, *Media and Power in Southeast Asia*. (Cambridge Elements: Politics and Society in Southeast Asia). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 71 pages, €15.00. ISBN 978-1-1084-6788-9

In the 2021 World Press Freedom Index (WPFI), which ranks 180 countries, 10 out of the 11 countries in Southeast Asia can be found on the bottom half of the list. Certainly, this has something to do with Southeast Asia's long history of authoritarianism, with censorship policies and threats to journalists that limit media practices. However, classifying the region into free/non-free categories oversimplifies the issue because it negates the positive changes that have occurred in each country.

Even if the media is considered “not free”, Cherian George and Gayathry Venkiteswaran argue in *Media and Power in Southeast Asia* that countries in Southeast Asia are “unfree in markedly different ways” (p. 3). The book tries to capture the nuances of these differences within the context of the relationships between the media, government, civil society and the private sector, where structural changes and democratisation processes might or might not be impacted by the changes in relations between them.

The book's main thesis centres on four issues – media freedom, independence, pluralism and safety – whose developments have been challenged by “trends towards commercialisation, digital platforms and identity-based politics” (p. 2). The first chapter criticises the current scientific frameworks on the comparison of media systems, which tend to be Eurocentric; it simultaneously debunks stereotyped concepts such as “Asian values/culture” and “development journalism” (p. 8). Such concepts are often applied uncritically to Asian societies to evaluate their political and media systems using the lens of Western liberal democracy. The current models are not transferable to the colourful Southeast Asian context, which makes modelling the Southeast Asian media system a challenging undertaking. The authors do not attempt to build a model but rather capture these nuances through five analytical themes that structure the book.

Using Malaysia, Myanmar and Indonesia as case studies, the second chapter deals with the question of political change and its effect on media practices

and policies. This chapter traces the role of media and civil society during democratic transitions in those countries. Inevitably, due to its publication date in 2019, the book cannot capture the latest political developments in the three countries, especially in Myanmar and Malaysia, where the old powers returned to their former positions by subverting the power of the reformers. These unexpected events affirm the authors' cautionary statement at the book's conclusion that it is imprudent to make any predictions about political developments in Southeast Asia. Media and power relations in the region should thus be understood as being in a condition of constant flux rather than at rest.

Chapter 3 highlights the persistence of authoritarianism in Singapore through the People's Action Party (PAP), the only regime in Southeast Asia that has ruled without interruption since its first electoral victory in 1959. Many lessons can be learned about Singapore's unprecedented media policy as a supportive instrument of the regime, such as "calibrated coercion" (p. 24) or "differential censorship" and "selective liberalisation" (p. 26). The Singapore experience breaks the tenet of the positive correlation between democracy and the level of socio-economic progress of a country, because although Singapore is categorised as "very bad" (ranked 160th) in the 2021 WPFI, it still enjoys a high-income economy.

The next chapter discusses the enduring themes of media studies, such as media commercialisation, (cross-)ownership and conglomeration. The focus is on the interplay among the political elites, their cronies and media moguls to advance each political and/or business agenda so as to form an oligarchy. On the one hand, politics controls the media to perpetuate the political agenda, especially during an election period. On the other hand, the media can comply for commercial reasons or can criticise the status quo through independent media and media in exile. This chapter is suitably representative because it takes Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia, the Philippines, Myanmar and Thailand as its case studies.

Chapter 5 raises a recently popular theme around the globe: the increasing polarisation in society caused by identity-based politics amid soaring open access to media and political space. The state has the ability to implement "selective silencing" (p. 42) to discriminately silence the vulnerable through regulatory instruments controlling defamation, blasphemy, sedition and *lèse-majesté*. The two case studies for this chapter describe the actions of right-wing intolerant groups, in which certain Muslim groups are the victims of discrimination, in Myanmar, or the perpetrators of persecution, in Indonesia. Social media is highlighted in its capacity as a platform for spreading populist rhetoric and hoaxes by cyber armies that exacerbate the crisis.

The concluding chapter examines the extent to which the internet causes disruption in the political space and democratisation process in Southeast Asia through the examples of Vietnam and Malaysia. The authors identify

three periods of internet adoption in the context of power struggles between the ruling and the opposition parties: the stage where the opposition groups were able to take advantage of this technology, then the stage of repression from the government, followed by internet colonisation by the ruling group to regain control and continue coercion against the insurgents.

The work closes with the statement that democratisation cannot have a singular interpretation. From a theoretical point of view, this plurality of meaning represents the position of the authors, who problematise democracy around “the idea of participation” (p. 10) – that is, where politics and the media are seen as public spheres in which elements of society struggle to send their ideas and opinions across various platforms in an attempt to be relevant.

In contrast to many studies about Southeast Asia that tend to concentrate on internationally applicable concepts rather than genuinely discovering new knowledge from the ground, this theoretical position is in line with the authors’ methodological choice, which inductively addresses the dynamics of Southeast Asia’s political/media culture. It enriches the theoretical building of media studies as a whole while contributing to scientific debates that question the extent to which a media system can travel to different societies.

It is worth mentioning that the authors are from Singapore (C. George) and Malaysia (G. Venkiteswaran), and there are many case studies from these two countries (e.g., Chapter 3 is almost entirely about Singapore). This leads to the question of proportionality of representation of other nations in the region, with Laos, Brunei and Timor-Leste not represented at all in this study. This oversight – either by choice or limitations of the research – does not increase their relevance in scientific discourses. It is probably the major weakness of this book, which the authors themselves acknowledge on page 3.

The method of comparison of this study, which is not based on countries, is a strength because it serves to break the boundaries of “container thinking” (p. 9,) which sets geographical boundaries on the unit of analysis. By concentrating on case studies, the authors succeed in generating new concepts, something that would be impossible if they deductively applied analytical categories from existing concepts. In general, this method renders the volume sufficiently informative despite its modest page count.

Subekti Priyadharna