CHAPTER - I

THE CONTEXTUAL VARIABLES OF POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Political development is the hallmark of the modernizing polities. Tremendous political development has taken place in the twentieth century. Democracy and human rights have become the watchwords at the turn of the century. Worldwide, the trend is towards liberal political development. The process of industrialization and urbanization, the improved means of communications and transportation, the application of technology resulting in higher levels of productivity, the spread of education leading to increased awareness, and the weakening of traditional hierarchized social bonds being replaced by secular-rational bonds have induced political changes toward democratization of political culture and institutionalization of political structures and processes in liberal directions. There has been logical extension of civil and political rights and socio-economic welfare activities by the state. There is close relationship between the quality of life and democracy. The top twenty countries on the Human Development Index of the Human Development reports of the United Nations Development Programme since 1992 have consistently been political democracies. These are all flourishing liberal democracies with emphasis upon formal equality, rule of law, open competition for political power, independent judiciary and periodic elections, which keep the rulers, more or less, accountable to the electorate in terms of preserving and promoting its interests.

However, all is not well with the western democracies. Many of those lag behind in equity standard. There is a great deal of debate still going on whether the
The notion of democracy should include just procedural aspects,¹ or should it also include socio-economic framework to enhance the intensity, penetration, appeal and defence of democracy². The elite character of the western representative democracies is well documented.³ The economic as well as political power is concentrated in the elite that often undergo change from one set of elite to another through open competition for political power. The people exercise free choice in a given polity, yet, the political development occurs within a liberal-capitalist framework as the media is controlled by corporate interests⁴ remain and the electoral process is not free from money-politics.⁵ The transparency in governance still remains a distant goal for many advanced democracies. Those lack the real deliberative and participatory character as institutional mechanisms are not strengthened.⁶ People are relatively indifferent to


political issues and even the voters' turnout in elections is very low.\(^7\) The political
decision-making power remains centralized depriving the ordinary citizens to
participate directly and intimately in the decision-making process. Another drawback
often emphasized is that the majoritarian character of representative democracy
impinges upon the social solidarity and minority interests, particularly in the context
of third world plural societies. However, the negative impact of these drawbacks is
diluted in the western polities by high standards of living, infrastructure, the absence
of severe deprivations in terms of food, health and education, maintenance of high
level of tolerance for opposition, extensive civil and political rights with focus upon
individual protection, and the freedom of action available to the innumerable interest
groups along with state's sensitivity towards civil society.\(^8\)

Political development has occurred in third world countries too, but the
context, form, pace and direction is very different. The colonial legacy has a distinct
sway over the political development of these countries. In fact, the process was first
externally induced by the colonial powers. In most of the countries mature conditions
did not prevail to sustain open competition and democratic institutions. Nor the
governmental institutions and political processes were designed or strengthened
enough to cope with the traditional political culture, underdeveloped economy or the
plural character of these societies. Democratic apparatuses were adopted or imposed
upon the decolonized people without preparing adequate groundwork for democratic

\(^7\) Political apathy is justified in the name of order and stability. See, Morris Jones, "In Defence of
Apaty," *Political Studies*, 1959, No. 2, pp. 25-37; B.R. Berelson et al. *Voting*, University of

\(^8\) For political development process in the West and the challenges faced and overcome by it, see,
participation and governance. Hence within short period of time, the flimsy and hastily-erected political structures started crumbling down. In the absence of detraditionized and secular mass political culture, strong leaders typically supported by armies manipulated the political discourse and established authoritarian rules. The switchovers were craftily managed by them with the help of new ideological tools namely, the doctrines of "Asian democracy," "Guided Democracy," "Asian values," "strong state," "corruption-free government," "public interest," or "stability" etc. The new authoritarian or soft-authoritarian regimes were tolerated because, the civil society was weak and partly, these regimes were able to deliver and restore a semblance of socio-economic and political order and stability in some countries. Southeast Asian countries typically symbolized this state of affairs. It is against this background that the political development in Southeast Asia has to be delineated, analysed and understood.

Be that as it may, there are contextual variables that set Southeast Asia apart from the rest of the developing world. These contextual variables have immensely contributed to their transition from colonial to independent status, then from rudimentary democratic predicament to soft authoritarian disposition. Recently, a set of common factors has pushed the political process in these countries towards some level of genuine democratization. Of these variables, some are common while others are unique to each country. Hence, there are commonalities in their developmental experiences and there are variations too. The variations are as marked as the commonalities. Malaysia stands out as a unique case of political development, yet it

9. See, J. Juan and A. Stepan, eds. The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes, John Hopkins University, Baltimore, 1978
shares a number of features with the other political systems of the region. All except Thailand have been ex-colonies; still, the colonial experiences have been too varied as the nine countries were shared by as many as six colonial powers during the course of period extending from less than a century in case of Burma and Indo-China to over three centuries in case of Philippines and Indonesia.\textsuperscript{11} Besides, they commonly faced the Japanese interregnum during the Second World War.\textsuperscript{12} Some were ruled more ruthlessly than the others. Some achieved independence markedly as a result of revolutionary struggle against the colonial authorities, like Indonesia or Vietnam, while some got it largely as a gift from the imperial powers, like Philippines. All became independent after the Second World War, but at different times and under different circumstances.\textsuperscript{13} Each country got independence at different level of political development.

The political development was marked in Philippines where the Americans well over a period of forty years had introduced gradually some institutions of democratic governance preceding the Second World War.\textsuperscript{14} The democratic constitution which was to guide the polity after Independence had been well in place since 1934. The constitution was prepared on the pattern of American presidential system with checks and balances. Though, the legacy of U.S. colonialism was considerable oligarchy-building, but little state-building.\textsuperscript{15} The Malaysians did not have long experience; still, they had been initiated into representative parliamentary

\begin{itemize}
\item[14.] Nicholas Tarling, \textit{Nations}, op.cit., pp. 21-6.
\end{itemize}
system before the British left. The same was true of Singapore. The Indonesians were not initiated into the practices of political participation. The parliamentary form of government was entirely new to the soil, superimposed by the retreating Dutch. Hence it could not function with any measure of smoothness and, therefore, after a while, it was discarded in favour of presidential system, which the Indonesians had digenously built during the phase of revolutionary struggle. The successful violent revolutionary struggles in Indonesian and Vietnam had clear effect on the future development of these countries, although both adopted entirely different courses of political development. After becoming independent, all nations came under strong nationalist or revolutionary charismatic leaders. These were all men of exceptional qualities but they greatly differed in their leadership styles. Tunku Rahman of Malaysia and Magsaysay of Philippines proved to have far better democratic credentials than Sukarno of Indonesia or Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore (they, too, were brilliant and visionary leaders, otherwise).

The power was gradually usurped either directly by the military generals or by the strong leaders with the backing of military. The period of personal rule outside the democratic framework ushered in Southeast Asia during the 1960s and 70s. Thailand after a brief period of democratic rule after the Second World War reverted back to military dictatorship. In Indonesia, the experiment in liberal democracy was given up and Sukarno established his personal rule under the misconstrued conception of “Guided Democracy,” soon to be displaced by more authoritarian military-backed Suharto regime that ruled for thirty years with fine grip. In Philippines, democratically elected Marcos usurped political power at the end of his second term (as the

constitution of Philippines prohibited third term for presidency) with the backing of military. In Burma too, the military generals captured political power after a decade of democratic experience in 1962. The story of Indo-China is entirely different. They went under the influence of communists as a result of communist-guerrilla revolutionary struggle and adopted authoritarian-Leninist structures of governance.

However, the winds of progressive change are blowing in these countries.\(^{17}\) The Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia have recently been formally democratized.\(^{18}\) Democracy ushered in, not as a result of voluntary addition of political power by authoritarian leaders. All the three countries experienced mass-protest movements in favour of democracy, extending well over a period of decade. The middle classes, especially the students, workers, peasant and NGOs participated a great deal in spearheading and organizing these movements. The increased strength and autonomy of civil society, thus, augurs well for the democracy.

Only two countries, Malaysia and Singapore were able to maintain total civilian control over the military and their political systems have shown tremendous resilience. Malaysia has proved to be the only country in Southeast Asia, or perhaps in the world, which has been able to retain consistent semi-democratic status for nearly half a century without substantially democratizing either, nor giving up democratic apparatus, altogether. The unique aspect is that the same coalition dominated by the same party is ruling the country since Independence. It has brought various classificatory labels to the Malaysian political system such as “semi-democracy,” “quasi-democracy,” “illiberal democracy,” “democracy without turnover,” or even,

\(^{17}\) C.D. Neher and Ross Marley, *Democracy*, op.cit.; M. Vatikiotis *Political*, op.cit.

\(^{18}\) However, fresh trouble in Thailand has again recently blown up.
“semi-authoritarian” state. However, the process is extremely complex. It can’t be explained or endorsed merely by looking at ‘democratic model’ or ‘authoritarian model.’ The process of political development is intimately connected to the precarious ethnic composition of the country. The political debate is guided as well as constrained by ethnic considerations in the country. Malaysia is a strange example wherein extensive protections in terms of reservations in jobs, scholarships and educational facilities have been granted to the numerically majority community. The interface between authoritarian state practices and communal politics injects a very special element in the process of political development particularly in the context of maintenance of political stability, peace and continuous economic growth. It is in spite of the fact that tensions and communal feelings are ever present on both sides of the communal divide between the majority Malays and the minority Chinese but are not allowed to spill over into any sort of bloodbath or open conflict.

Political development in a country can only be fairly gauged only over a long period of time. Small setbacks and occasional hiccups do not permit a pattern to be clearly discernible. Political development just does not take place at the structural level. The attitudinal and behavioural changes are equally important and prove to be strong catalyst in the overall process of political development. The changes in terms of evolving political culture are shaped by the interplay of various subtle and intangible factors like people’s psychological orientations towards politics in terms of motivations, perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and values, the level of education and political debate in a society, the democratic space available to the media and

opposition coupled with the availability of modern means of communications.\textsuperscript{20} Hundreds of contingent elements work for brief periods and then subside. Generally, institutional development takes place at two levels — elite directed as well as that necessitated by socio-economic changes. The process and the direction can be a replica of the West or it can be built upon indigenous foundations and sources. Or it may harmoniously combine the indigenous elements with the borrowed elements. It is no easy task to delineate the model of political development pursued by a given polity, its pattern, stages, causes, and implications.

When political development is studied, compared, differentiated and generalized in the context of a region as a whole consisting of several polities, the task can be much more challenging and daunting, at the same time, fruitful and rewarding. When the process of political development in Southeast Asia is studied and analyzed in its varied aspects, whatever broad similarities we may find — for instance, commonality of political and socio-economic problems, authoritarian streaks in traditional political culture, the military’s political role, the ethnic pluralism, the influence of religion, outward-looking economies, emergent middle class, patron-client relationships, personalism, multi-party fragmented system, controlled opposition, curbs on civil and political rights or resurgent democratic trends — generalizations still elude us. It is still more difficult, nay, impossible to generalize the pattern of political development or to discover a model of political development for a set of ten polities. Their levels of economic development, social engineering, national integration, institutionalization, protection and enforcement of civil rights, political culture and political socialization differ. In short, the historical background and

\textsuperscript{20} The import of communications and political culture for political development is comprehensively brought out in two volumes edited by Lucian Pye, namely, \textit{Communications and Political Development} and, \textit{Political Culture and Political Development}, both published by Princeton University Press, New Jersey in 1963 and 1965 respectively.
democratic experience vary from country to country. Nevertheless, the need for recognizing the general features remains. Therefore, an attempt has been made to explore some broad pattern or trend into which Southeast Asian nations in general chime in with, particularly, in the light of recent democratic transitions in some of them. While delineating the pattern, minor deviations or exceptions need to be ignored. As we know that differences are as marked as the similarities, therefore, the construction or suggestion of any closed and terse model or pattern of political development will prove to be futile. The different backgrounds, creative and visionary leadership, contingent elements and an interplay of hundreds of factors are always capable of evading any generalized conceptual framework to determine political development, if such framework is possible at all.

The diversities as well as the different paths traversed by the Southeast Asian nations in their developmental courses need to be understood in the contextual perspective. It is also the purpose of the present study to account for the difference in the courses of political development followed by Southeast Asian polities. Even the differences are significant from the point of view of explaining and comparing their developmental experiences. Interestingly, the same factors like culture, religion, geography, economy, trade, history, colonial legacy, leadership styles foster linkages as well as variations in their developmental experiences. Still, the linkages appear to be more pronounced than the divisions at the subtle level, which make Southeast Asia a unit for analytical purposes. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has reinforced the cultural, economic and political linkages. It is a formal organization encompassing all the countries of the region meant to facilitate and promote economic cooperation and trade among them. The close economic ties and enhanced trade and dialogue make them more susceptible to political influences across each other’s
frontiers. The ASEAN experience makes the study of the region more relevant and interesting.

The Southeast Asia comprises of ten states. The upper (northern) mainland consists of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos (the three states collectively known as Indo-China), Thailand and Burma (Myanmar). The archipelago states are Indonesia in the South and Philippines in the West. The mainland is joined with the archipelago by the centrally located state of Malaysia. The two tiny states of Singapore and Brunei adjoin Malaysia at the tips. Malaysia is, geographically, further divided into distantly located East Malaysia (Peninsula) and West Malaysia (Borneo territories). The peninsula is attached to the mainland by just a narrow strip of land. Around ninety-five percent of its frontier touches the sea. The South Eastern coastline of the Malaysian Peninsula runs parallel to the Island Sumatra of Indonesia. A narrow passage, which is known as the Strait of Malacca passes between Malaysia and Sumatra. This strait traditionally occupies the most important place as it links the Indian Ocean with the Pacific Ocean and has always been used as a gate-pass in the maritime world trading system. The territories of Sarawak and Sabah (at the northern end of the Island Borneo of Indonesia) are known as East Malaysia and these states along with peninsular states form the federation, i.e. Malaysia. Malaysia’s historical, cultural, ethnic, religious, economic and political links with the southern islands fits it better with those than with the countries of the Mainland. It is not argued here to discount the historical and cultural relationship of Malaysia with the mainland but to emphasize its relative closeness to the archipelago.

Southeast Asia is geographically large and scattered, demographically, mobile and densely populated (in pockets), ecologically bountiful and fragile, ethnically
diffused and precarious, culturally rich and sophisticated, economically diversified and outward looking, politically distinct and inward looking and historically, sharing the colonial legacy and well connected to the great civilizations of India and China.

The Region as a Viable Unit

Malaysia acquires special significance and role in the region as it unites northern and southern parts of Southeast Asia so that the region appears as a natural unit in geographical, cultural, ethnic, economic and political terms. Malaysia stands out, occupying a unique place in the region. There is a debate over Southeast Asia’s qualification to be considered as a coherent or natural regional unit. In fact, before the Second World War, the region was not generally considered as a closely-knit unit. Although, the region has been for centuries recognized in political and geographic terms, more or less, as a unit by merchants, travellers, navigators and writers from India, Arabia and China. However, these people did not mean by Southeast Asia the same countries as it is constituted of, today. The region was, generally, understood as the Islands, not the mainland. When the term Southeast Asia, or Southeastern Asia began to be used by the authors in the West in the later half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, they also did not include exactly the same countries in the region as are included today. Indo-China and Philippines were generally excluded, while some included even India or China while categorizing Southeast Asia.

The region shot into the consciousness of the world with the establishment of the Southeast Asia Command (SEAC), the military command that was created by the

British during the Second World War in 1943 at the Anglo-American Quebec conference to counter the Japanese aggression. It omitted Philippines and included four regions which are not part of the region. World War II affected the idea of “Southeast Asia” in three important ways. The region was made visible. In 1945, a Division of Southeast Asian Affairs was created in the U.S. Department of State, and in 1946 and 1947, Southeast Asian Studies units were established at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African studies and Yale University. More than diversities, the similarities across the region began to be emphasized by the scholars. A very important work of D.G.E. Hall did not include Philippines in the region on the plea that it stood “outside the mainstream of historical developments” in the region. However, Hall included Philippines as part of the region in the second edition of his book in 1964, bowing down to the increasing tendency and near unanimity among the scholars on Southeast Asia to treat it as part of the region. Otherwise too, Philippines neither fits in with the Far East nor with Australia. It stands, geographically and ethnically, much closer to Malaysia and Indonesia than to any other part of the world.

The debate about the feasibility of the region as a viable unit came to an end with the establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). A regional organization, aimed primarily at economic cooperation among the member countries, ASEAN was founded in 1967 by Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore and Philippines. Today it covers all the countries of the region. The success of

23. Ibid. pp. 6-7.
24. Ibid. p. 8.
26. Brunei joined in 1984, Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in July 1997 and Cambodia in 1999. Some earlier attempts at regional unity could not succeed as those were based on narrow vision and did not take into account the geopolitics of the region. For instance, Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) established in 1961 included only Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand and lasted until 1967 when ASEAN was founded. The ASEAN has proved to be extremely crucial for the survival and well being of member countries in the context of competitive global system
ASEAN has, more forcefully than any other idea or effort, imprinted the distinctiveness of Southeast Asia region on the psyche of the world leaders and scholars apart from bringing the inhabitants of the region closer.

**Ecology and Demography**

The total area of Southeast Asia is around 4,369,290 and it inhabits a population of 5.8 million (in 2001), which amounts to eight percent of the total world population. approximately. Indonesia is the world’s largest Muslim-populated country. Two religions are dominant, Islam and Buddhism, throughout the region. Philippines has predominantly Christian population. The region attracts a good rainfall and it is extremely resource-rich. Recently, the region has become the hub of export-oriented manufacturing units, particularly the electronic goods. The region has not known the extremes of poverty as is experienced in South Asia and Africa. All the countries of the region touch the sea, except Laos, which is land-locked. The states of the region are not in the habit of severe and irreconcilable conflicts with each other. Boundary disputes though existent but do not surface in their dealings on a consistent basis. Indonesia is a giant in terms of size and population but the relative weight of economies of other states offsets its engrossing predominance over the region. The region has cordial relations with all the great powers of the world. It has successfully managed its power relations in the competitive global system with great diplomacy and cohesive-collective bargaining. The region is the envy of many powers but did

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28. Spratly Islands in the South China Sea have been a bone of contention among Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia and Vietnam. More alarmingly, China also claims these islands and so does Taiwan. However, no serious conflict or war has erupted over these claims. In mid 1999, ASEAN established a special committee to formulate a code of conduct to be observed by all claimants to the Spratly Islands. A draft code of conduct was approved in November 1999.
not become a theatre of cold war rivalry or post-cold war upheavals.\textsuperscript{29} The region is nuclear-free.\textsuperscript{30} All these factors make Southeast Asia, potentially, a zone of peace and prosperity.

Southeast Asia, like South Asia is a region of great diversity and contrast. Each of the ten countries of the region represent distinct culture, tradition, history, language, religion, ethnicity, and stage of economic and political development. Still, a thread of unity pervades the whole region, which Southeast Asia, unlike South Asia, has been able to recognize and realize to a great extent. The sheer size, which stretches over more than thirty-five degrees of latitudes and nearly fifty degrees of longitudes, makes it a region of geographical contrasts. Indonesia alone consists of around thirteen thousand islands, while Philippines has around seven thousand islands. Indonesia has slightly less than half the total area as well as population of Southeast Asia. However, the combined share of just Malaysia and Singapore outweighs the share of Indonesia in terms of Gross National Income (GNI). The density in Singapore is 6726 persons per square kilometre, while Brunei has density of 23. Four countries of the region have a population of more than six crores each. Indonesia with a population of more than twenty crores is the fourth largest country of the world, while Brunei sustains just three lakhs people.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{29} Though, lately the region is becoming a theatre of Muslim terrorists. The terrorist attack in the Bali island of Indonesia on October 12, 2001, which killed around 180 and injured around 300 people, is a case in point.

\textsuperscript{30} In December 1995 ASEAN heads of government signed a treaty in Bangkok establishing a Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (SEANWFZ). The treaty was also signed by Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos. It was extended to cover the offshore economic exclusion zones of each country. It prohibits the manufacture or storage of nuclear weapons within the region. On ratification by all the parties, the treaty entered into force on 27 March 1997. In July 1999, China and India agreed to observe the terms of the treaty.

However, the points of unity in geographical terms are many. All the countries are situated adjacent to one another. Except Laos, all countries have coastal lines along the sea. The population of the region is mainly clustered around fertile coastal sea-belts and around the river valleys in the mainland. The tropical Monsoon weather prevails and the rice is the basic crop of the region. The commercialization of agriculture along with the industrialization has freed the harvests from weather fluctuations. Huge dams have been built along the great rivers. There is a great deal of intra-regional cooperation in building dams and canals, whose full potential has yet to be tapped for irrigation and electricity.

Southeast is separated in the West from the Indian subcontinent and in the North from the Chinese mainland. It can be said that area East of Indian subcontinent and South of China may be loosely categorized as Southeast Asia. The location of two giants on the West and the North of the region and the ocean cover surrounding the region except in the North, makes it a coherent unit at least geographically, how much diverse its terrain might be. All these countries fit within a triangle.32

Ethnicity

The ethnic divisions are sharp across the region - outside as well as inside the frontiers of each nation. Broadly, there are four major ethnic or racial groups in the region - Malayo-Polynesians, commonly known as Malayas or Malays, inhabit Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Philippines and they also include the Chams in the mainland; the Sino-Tibetan group, which includes the Burmese, the Karens and the Chinese; the Austro-Asiatic group, which includes the Khmers and the Vietnamese;

and the Thais, including Laotians and Shams as well. However these groups are
further divided into hundreds of sub-groups or ethnic communities. For example,
Burmese, Karens and Chinese, belong to the same racial group, but in Burma there
are sharp ethnic differences and conflicts between these three groups. Burmese are
in majority in Burma but it also contains ethnic communities of Shams, Karens,
Chinese, Arakans, Indians, Mons and Kachins. each minority having a population of
more than half a million. Besides, there are hundreds of indigenous hill tribes.

The problem of ethnic minorities is very precarious in Malaysia. Sixty six
percent people are Malays who include the indigenous natives of Sabah and Sarawak.
A quarter of the population is Chinese and there are nearly eight percent people of
Indian origin. The Chinese and Indians are mainly concentrated in the urban areas,
while Malays chiefly inhabit the rural areas. Further complicating the balance, the
Chinese’ hold upon the economy is nearly double than that of Malays. The difference
was manifold at the time of Independence, but has been bridged to such extent due to
the socio-economic policies of the government, which were undertaken to restructure
economy so as to correct the economic imbalance and eventually eliminate the
identification of class with race. The ethnic restructuring programme has introduced
some tension and ill-will between the communities, yet it has also facilitated

33. Ibid. p.7.
34. Ibid.
35. Clark D. Neher and Ross Marlay, Democracy and Development in Southeast Asia: The Winds of
Minister’s department, Kuala Lumpur, 2001, p. 89
Lumpur, 1971, pp. 1-4
communal peace as politically dominant Malays no longer feel deprived or threatened by the preponderance of Chinese in the economic field.38

The Indonesian Malayas inhabiting different islands have acquired distinct ethnic identity over a long period of time. They are today known as Javanese, Balinese, Acehese, Sudanese, Madurese etc. The differences exist within the respective islands, too. For instance, the Javanese are concentrated in the Eastern and Central parts of Java island while the people inhabiting the Western part of Java are known as Sundanese. Similarly within the large island of Sumatra three ethnic groups are concentrated, namely, Minangkabau, Batak and Acehese.39 The Acehese are demanding a separate state. Fierce violence has erupted between the different island communities after the overthrow of authoritarian centralist regime of Suharto. The interesting feature is that most of these islanders are Muslim-populated and belong to the same racial group.

The Filipinos of Philippines are also of Malaya origin but due to the long colonial association with different imperial powers, adoption of Christianity by almost ninety percent of the people and separate geographical location, they have developed their distinct ethnic identity. As a consequence, huge similarities as well as dissimilarities can be found between these people and the Malayas of other parts of the region. Singapore has two-third majority of the Chinese but significant numbers of Malayas as well as people of Indian origin also reside there. Thailand is also inhabited by a number of minority ethnic communities such as Khmers, Malayas, Karens and

39. Lucian W. Pye, Southeast, op.cit., p. 43
Chinese but Thais have preponderant presence over them. Cambodia is predominantly Khmer while Vietnam predominantly Annamese but both communities cut across the frontiers of these states.\(^40\) Indo-China is also inhabited by a sizable number of Chinese.

Thus, we see that nearly all the countries of the region are besotted with the problem of accommodating ethnic minorities. The Chinese are usually dispersed in the mainland countries and are found in significant numbers in Singapore and Malaysia, partly, due to imperial policies of the British.\(^41\) Although, the problem is starker in Malaysia and Singapore but their record in maintaining communal peace is better than any other country of the region. Indians are also found in substantial numbers in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Burma. The complex pattern of movement and migration of people has been characteristic of Southeast Asia starting from the Indian and Chinese influences, way back two millennia. The practice continued through the voyages of Arabs in medieval times, to the imperialist infiltration of the western colonial powers culminating in the transportation of Indians and Chinese by the British to work as labourers in rubber plantations and tin-manufacturing units in Malaya. D.G.E. Hall has described the region as a veritable "chaos of races and languages."\(^42\)

The ethnic or communal politics engulfs all the polities of Southeast Asia.\(^43\) This feature has significantly moulded the political development process of these

\(^{40}\) ibid.
\(^{41}\) See, Milton Osborne, Southeast, op.cit., pp. 104-7
\(^{42}\) D.G.E. Hall, op.cit. p. 5.
polities. Indonesia suffers from it even to a greater extent and at much more complex level than any other country of Southeast Asia. The ethnic polarization is sharper there because different ethnic communities inhabit different regions or islands. Therefore, some of them are continuously embarking upon the pursuit of secessionism while the decentralization or devolution of power is the central theme of political debate today. Singapore too faces the problem but its small city size puts the problem within manageable limits. The problem is present in Philippines and Thailand, more or less, on a similar scale and pattern. It is much more severe in the former where the Southern parts dominated by Muslims have waged a long armed struggle against the centralization efforts of the Filipino authorities to extend their control over the areas. Hundreds of thousand of people have died as a result of brutal conflict. On a lesser magnitude, Thailand also has to cope with Muslim Malay minorities on its southern borders. Burma is besotted with numerous big and small ethnic minority groups. The repressive military regime may well be exacerbating the potential unrest among these groups in the absence of democratic channels to release the tensions.

Malaysia and Singapore have tackled the problem of ethnic minorities better by preserving the precarious balance between the competing claims of various groups through accommodation, strict law enforcement and continuously rising standards of living. However, the record of other states in preserving inter-communal peace has not been equally tenable. Philippines, Myanmar and Thailand have been unable to resolve their problems with ethnic groups, particularly in their southern parts, respectively. Indonesia has recently faced a lot of discontent, violence and separatist uprisings in a number of islands, particularly Aceh, Irian Jaya, Maluku (Spice Islands)
etc. The unrest in these places is simmering partly because of the legacy of
corruption, neglect and authoritarian tactics of the old Suharto regime and partly due
to the hangover of the Southeast Asian economic crisis of the late 1990’s, and also
due to the absence of federal structure of government in such a diverse and large
country. The problem of ethnicity is further compounded in the light of the fact that
the frontiers of these states were carved out by the colonial powers, keeping in mind
their own economic and strategic interests as well as mutual obligations and relations
toward each other. This meant an additional challenge to the ruling elite of the
independent countries. They had to manage the difficult tasks of penetration,
integration and participation, simultaneously.

The linguistic diversity also coincides very often with the ethnic-cultural diversities.
No single language is spoken, predominantly, in any two states except the Malay,
which is the predominant and official language of Malaysia as well as Brunei.
Nevertheless, there are marked similarities in the languages of Southern islands as
well as of the mainland. Each state has its own language which is spoken by the
majority of the people of the state, at the same time, each state is multi-lingual in the
sense that nearly all states are besotted with ethnic minorities, and a number of local
languages are spoken. There are thousands of dialects of the principal languages
across the region. For example, it is believed by the linguists that throughout the
southern islands, the dialects or the offshoots of the principal Malay language are
spoken, which have become indigenized and acquired distinct identity and quality
apart from the parent language. Bahasa, the language predominantly spoken in
Indonesia in hundreds of variegated dialects has common origin with the Malay

45. See, Nicholas Tarling, *Nations*, pp. 47-56
46. M. Osborne, *Southeast*, op. cit., p. 8
language spoken in Malaysia. Moreover, Malay is also spoken in different dialectical forms in the southern parts of Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, respectively. The Thai (Tai) language is not only spoken in Thailand but with considerable dialectical variations in the northern parts of Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, by the Shams of Burma as well as in the lowland of Laos.

Religion and Culture

Religion is the strongest cohesive force throughout Southeast. It is the basic ingredient that goes into forming the national identity of these societies. The region represents diversity and contrast in religion, too. Islam is dominant religion in the southern states of Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei, while mainland population is Buddhist. At the same time, the followers of Islam are found in some pockets of mainland as well as Philippines, while Buddhists in significant numbers also inhabit the maritime states of Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei. Some states have problems in dealing with the Muslim minorities within their territorial jurisdictions.

The Malays practice Islam, while the Chinese are followers of Buddhism-Taoism. The Hindus are also found in good numbers in Malaysia, Singapore, Burma and in some pockets of Indonesia. Islam has proved to be problematic as not only separatist movements and terrorist activities are waged in the name of Islam in some areas, but its role in politics is also significant. Some sort of polarization has arisen between the modernists and traditionalists – those who want to adapt Islam to the modern conditions and those who adhere strictly to the traditional version. “This split

47. Ibid. p. 8.
48. Ibid. p. 7.
49. Lucian Pye, Southeast, op. cit., pp. 42-3
50. The problem is more acute in the Southern parts of Thailand and Philippines where armed resistance from the Muslim separatist groups is brewing for decades. See,
between modernism and conservatism has flared up in various forms and has influenced the organization of political parties and social associations.\textsuperscript{51}

The cultural diversities are acute across Southeast Asia yet a thread of unity is found among different cultures. The boundaries of cultural diversity often coincide with distinct ethnic groups. The Chinese influence can be seen in the northern mainland while the Indian and the Arab influences can be seen largely throughout the southern parts. The Indian influence came along with the spread of Hinduism and Buddhism, beginning with the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. By introducing new concepts of the nature of authority and of man’s relationship to his universe, Hinduism and Buddhism had decisive influence upon the political culture of Southeast Asia.\textsuperscript{52} The ruling classes found support and patronage in these religions. Recognizing the Hindu influence, Pye says,

\begin{quote}
The concept that the legitimacy of the government has a divine basis spurred attempts at creating empires, and in this fashion the diffusion of religion carried with it the diffusion of political power. ... Indianized empires were spawned in Burma, Cambodia, and Indonesia, all having many characteristics in common. ... The symbols of the monarchy were mainly derived from India, and the law was largely based on the early Indian legal code or the code of Manu.\textsuperscript{53}
\end{quote}

All the countries of Southeast Asia, except Thailand, have a colonial past. They remained colonies of one or the other western imperial powers. An interesting feature of colonialism in the region is that it experienced the presence of six western powers. The Indonesian islands were colonized by the Dutch, East Timor remained under Portuguese, Philippines was colonized by the Spanish and, after two hundred and a half years of their rule, it was occupied by the US for the next half a century.

\textsuperscript{51} Lucian Pye, \textit{Southeast}, op. cit., p. 44
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 20
\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Ibid.}
Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and Burma were occupied by the British and the Indo-
China was colonized by the French. All these colonial powers pursued their aims in
the colonies for significantly different reasons, sometimes, even to check each other
or maintain global balance of power. However, the factor, which was common to the
aspirations of all the colonial powers was the exploitation of the human and natural
resources of the subjugated territories in pursuit of their commercial and strategic
interests. Indonesian islands, Philippines and East Timor remained colonies for
around three centuries, while some other countries experienced effective imperial
control for even less than a century. Thus, the different countries of the region had
quite varied and distinct experience with colonial rule. Almost all the western
colonies were attacked and annexed over by Japan for a very brief period during the
Second World War. Japanese reign was ruthless, particularly, for the Chinese. The
impact of Japanese occupation was great. It sharpened the nationalist consciousness
and quickened the process towards independence of all the countries.

The western colonial powers not only changed the political landscape, but also
had profound impact upon the local culture. However, the influence of foreign
cultures upon the region has not been all-pervasive. The foreign influences were
received but reconciled with the indigenous cultures of the region. Herein lies the
beauty and the richness of various streams of indigenised cultures throughout
Southeast Asia. People have blended the alien cultures including the western ways of
life with the local customs, mores and cultural forms. The importance of indigenous

54. On colonial advance, see, M. Osborne, Southeast, op.cit., pp. 62-81
55. See, Pye, Southeast, op.cit., pp. 26-32
56. See, Milton Osborne, Southeast, op.cit., pp. 137-57
57. See, Ibid. pp. 158-78; N. Tarling, Nations, op.cit., pp. 79-89
cultural traditions in giving strength to the society and providing meaningful framework for social interaction can’t be underestimated.\textsuperscript{58}

The importance of Indian religious concepts, for instance, must be recognized for a broad area of Southeast Asia. But one of the most essential features of Hinduism, the caste system, was never adopted in the countries outside India. ... Even in Vietnam where dependence upon an external Chinese cultural tradition has clearly been more significant than elsewhere in Southeast Asia, the strength of non-Chinese cultural life, particularly below the level of the court, belies any picture of that country as a mere receiver of ideas, unable to offer traditions of its own.\textsuperscript{59}

Social Structure

Huge gaps in income between the rich and the poor classes exist. The extreme poverty also persists, at least, in some pockets. Communism had its appeal, particularly during the anti-colonial struggle, but afterwards found limited followers and it could not succeed anywhere except in Indo-China and there, too, the foreign influence in shaping the turn of the events could be clearly discerned. The society in much of Southeast Asia is organized around paternalistic relationships. Very often, these assume the form of an extensive network of patron-client relationships organized around mutual obligations. These kind of relationships are entrenched in the social structure of the region.

... In Southeast Asia, “exchange bonds” determine power, status, authority relations, and the citizen’s role in society. Powerful people in all walks of life (“patrons”), who control scarce resources, accumulate as many followers (“clients”) as possible. ... although these transactions are between a superior and a subordinate, dealings are personal, face-to-face, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{58} For a discussion on Southeast Asian cultural identities and their interface with modernity, see, Joel S. Kahn, ed. Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore & Thailand, ISEAS, Singapore, 1998.
\textsuperscript{59} Milton Osborne, \textit{Southeast op. cit.}, pp. 5-6.
\textsuperscript{60} Clark D. Neher and Ross Marlay, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 15.
However, old patterns of relationships and bonds of obligation are changing in a changing socio-economic profile of the region. As the modernization takes place, patron-client relationships diminish in importance. The new wealth and the penetrative state have helped the people to bypass traditional channels of patronage and protection. With new forms of entrepreneurial activity such as financing, trading and industrialization, universalisation of education, social mobility, ever-expanding choice of the people and formation of mass-based political parties, traditional bonds and habits along with the old system of patronage are breaking down. A strong middle class is emerging which has high stakes in gradual but consistent change. The change is slow in rural-agricultural areas. There, the family position and networks still provide a framework for social status and exchange.

Traditionally, a schism has always existed between the culture of the elite (as it always had strains of imported culture and the trappings of relative sophistication) and the culture of the ordinary folk, the peasant culture, more precisely. The peasants had indigenized culture with the trappings of relatively rough and more vulgarized forms of imported cultures.61 The gap in outlook the two cultures represent, remains, although bridging is under way in the wake of the process of modernization and the empowerment of the marginalized along with a great deal of socio-economic mobility.62

Political Systems

The party system is not properly institutionalized. The political parties lack ideological basis. Most of the political parties particularly the opposition ones are

62. Ibid.
fragmented and disorganized. This in partly due to the fact that the principled opposition has not been fairly tolerated. It is projected as an anomaly or as a threat to national ethos or ideology clothed in some very generalized terms such as ‘public interest,’ ‘national unity’ or ‘communal peace.’

The party system ranges from single-party communist systems in Laos and Vietnam and single party (bourgeoisie-civilian) monopoly system of Singapore to the transitional open multi-party systems of Thailand, Philippines and Indonesia.\(^6\) Malaysia is a unique example of single dominant party-coalition system, which is often referred to as hegemonic-consociational model of democracy. Burma is directly ruled by military-junta. In none of the countries, healthy bi-party system prevails. Only Philippines has experienced bi-party system but that was way far back in its first two decades of democratic experience (1946-65) when political power alternated between the two main parties.\(^6\) The dictatorial regime of Marcos later sponsored its own political party, KBL in the manipulated electoral system to legitimize the monopoly of authority. Another authoritarian leader, Suharto also adopted the same kind of tactics in Indonesia by sponsoring his own his Golkar party to stuff the parliament with his own men to perpetuate his personal rule.

Some states have seen relative political stability, while some others have experienced acute political instability. Malaysia has been ruled by the same coalition dominated by the Malay party, United Malays National Organization (UMNO) since independence. It has seen tremendous amount of stability, but not without severe curbs on civil rights and opposition activities. However, the country is ruled within


the mould of constitutional-legal framework. A single political party, People’s Action Party (PAP), has ruled Singapore, with authoritarian measures curbing the growth of opposition political parties, since 1965. Indonesia has also seen two long bouts of political stability, but under authoritarian regimes. From 1945 to 1998, Indonesia witnessed only two presidents, Sukarno and Suharto. With the overthrow of the New Order regime of Suharto in 1998 and its replacement by democratic regime, a degree of instability has been introduced in the archipelago. Violence has erupted at many places. However, it is not democracy that is responsible for this instability but the suppression of regional aspirations and the accumulated discontent of the past, which was simmering against the old dictatorial regime. Brunei, since independence, is ruled by an absolute monarchy. Vietnam is also experiencing recently a great deal of political and economic stability under absolutist communist regime, which is opening up. The democracy is lately flourishing in Thailand and Philippines but they have never experienced the kind of political stability which is generally associated with the mature models of representative democracy found in the west. Thailand experienced on an average one coup every five years since 1932 to 1979, but experienced only one coup since then and that too was for a brief period of two years in the early 1990’s.

The military has directly ruled Thailand over longer periods than the civilian governments have ruled, since the establishment of constitutional monarchy in 1932. The military has also directly ruled Burma while the military’s involvement in the communist party regime of Vietnam is also direct. Suharto, himself an ex-Army

General and Chief of Armed Forces captured power with the strong backing of military and continued to rule with the direct co-optation of military in civilian-cum-governance role under the concept of *dwi-fungsi*, the concept which was found appealing by the Burmese military junta too. This concept emphasizes military's dual role viz. the custodian of the defence of the country as well as the guardians of the internal peace, social harmony and political order. The dual function of the military according to the advocates of the doctrine becomes important in the context of developing countries' priorities in state-building and nation-building.

Doubtless the military has played its role in the politics of most of Southeast Asian countries. It has proved to be the catalyst as the modernized institution in the process of political development. But, it has also arrested the process, being a check on the free expression of democratic urges and its repressive role as an authoritarian institution involved in the process of governance. However, the military's role is receding as the civil society and political culture are maturing and secularizing, and also, more and more countries are embarking on the path of political liberalization. The military continues to be one of the most important institution in terms of its bearing upon political stability in countries like Indonesia, Thailand and Philippines etc. However, the military has been deactivated from its direct political role and seems to be contended in barracks for the time being. The de-militarization of political institutions has taken place at a rapid pace since the last decade. The vibrant civil society may prove to be the biggest bulwark against military's re-entry into the politics in future. The military regime is holding power in Burma, but its isolation can't keep the regime continue for long. The Vietnamese Communist Party dominated by military elements is facing the contradiction of its own making viz., pursuing

capitalist development and developing market economy under the statist-communist political framework. The contradiction is real. The moment the growth rates of economy dip or prices rise due to fluctuations of volatile international market any time, there is bound to be backlash from the civil society as has been experienced in many parts of the world.

Malaysia has parliamentary form of government, representatives elected directly in the regular elections based on universal adult franchise. The system has shown resilience since Independence but on a closer look, limited democracy prevails. There are substantial curbs upon civil liberties. The opposition functions within constraints as the democratic rights of freedom of expression, assembly and association are restricted. Media is also controlled by government. The opposition is intimidated and law is selectively used to curb the activities of the opposition. Still, the opposition is free to organize itself and to criticize the performance of the government (but not in terms of certain well defined policies which are considered by the authorities to be essential ingredients in the maintenance of social order and communal harmony and balanced economic development).

Monarchy has been modified to suit the modern conditions and democratic spirit. The king in chosen by the traditional hereditary rulers of states from amongst

themselves for five years on a rotational basis. The same coalition of political parties (with numbers fluctuating) known as Barisan Nasional (BN; it was known as Alliance in earlier phase) is uninterruptedly ruling at the centre. The politics revolve around its dominant partner, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). In successive elections, its controls around half of the seats won by the BN. The UMNO and its leadership have a decisive sway over managing the affairs of the country. The opposition is generally a divided House. In the face of such massive inter-communal coalition of political parties ruling at the centre, opposition has never been able to pose any formidable challenge to the incumbent government. Thus, political system maintains the predominance of Malays in political sphere with continuity, yet with enough scope for multiracial peaceful coexistence. The consistent economic growth has ensured a great deal of support and acquiescence from the people of all communities to the government, despite its autocratic style of functioning and repressive measures occasionally used to deal with dissent and opposition.73

Indonesia has just recently been democratized. With the adoption of unique form a government viz. the mixture of parliamentary and presidential, a consociational form of democracy is emerging there.74 However, Indonesia government is besotted with a number of regional separatist movements unleashed in the wake of collapse of highly centralized and authoritarian regime of Suharto in 1998. Suharto ruled for three decades with the direct backing of military that found


official representation in the central legislature. The central legislature was also manipulated through legal curbs on the participation and growth of opposition parties. Suharto’s ruling party, the Golkar had monopoly over the electoral process, therefore, always got majority in the legislature. The central legislature with heavy official representation in it, used to elect the president. It was always a formality given the iron grip of Suharto and military over the system. The consistent economic growth during those years helped Suharto to rule with impunity. However, the moment people experienced break with prosperity and faced hardship, unrest and discontent developed against the regime. Suharto was forced to step down and pave way for democratic transition in the face of mass upsurge, symbolized as reformasi. Democracy has been gradually strengthened since then. The unitary constitution of 1945 has been restored. However, a series of amendments have been incorporated to suit the requirements of transitional phase. Given the highly diverse ethnic configuration of the country accentuated further by its geography, the federal form of government appears to be imperative in a democratic set up. Increasing the autonomy of the regions may be a temporary solution. The regional autonomy can be better reconciled with the national unity under a federal set up.

The last one and a half decade saw a great deal of flux and movement towards democracy in the region. It started with the pro-democracy mass protests in Philippines in 1986 resulting in the overthrow of the dictatorial regime of Marcos and establishment of democracy. Marcos had usurped political power by overthrowing

democratic system. He came to power democratically, but imposed Emergency in 1972 and became a de facto dictator. Democracy evolved amidst illiberal mould in Philippines since 1986-upheaval under the presidentialist republican system. The procedural anomalies persist in the system. The system of checks and balances has not been properly streamlined. The cronyism and corruption remain the biggest challenge. The political and economic power is concentrated in a few dominant families, which number just a few hundreds. The kin ties govern the political behaviour. A strong middle class is emerging independent of the patron-client relationships. It may prove to be bulwark against favouritism, cronyism and corrupt ways of the political elites.

Thailand witnessed civilian-military clashes in 1992 resulting in army crackdown on protesting students and masses, eventually paving the way for the fall of military-led government. A civil parliamentary government has functioned since then. The military’s presence in politics and policymaking has substantially declined and no attempt by the military to capture political power has been witnessed since then. However, the political system has been characterized by political instability and frequent changes in governments under parliamentary system. Amidst hung parliaments, snap elections, scandals, devastating economic crisis of late 1990’s, corruption, electoral manipulations and elitism, the democracy is under strains to find roots under the new Constitution introduced in the late 1990’s. The autocratic style of functioning of democratically elected prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, further compounded the democratization process. The civil society and judiciary have


asserted independence and acted as checks upon authoritarian impulses re-emerging in the system.

Cambodia also witnessed democratization since mid-1990s under the auspices of the United Nations. However, as the country has been ravaged by the decades of intervention by the foreign powers, civil war and the accompanied bloodbath, disruption and dislocation, its transition is not smooth, and not without setbacks. Its Prime Minister Hun Sen, although democratically elected, uses authoritarian measures with impunity. The nation is torn between various local leaders, military cliques, militiamen and political parties. Primordial loyalties are more important than the national identity. The political culture is not respectful towards democratic procedures nor the political leadership is sensitive towards promoting democratic values.80

Singapore is ruled by single-party system. The citizens have a right to elect their representatives but the ruling party, the PAP decides who is eligible or fit to contest the elections.81 The activity of the opposition parties is restricted as the ruling party screens the candidates proposed by them to contest the elections. People have a right to choose but ruling party decides whom they should choose. However, a constitutional amendment of 1984 enables the government to offer up to three non-constituency seats to the opposition parties. Another legislation approved in 1990 and amended in 1997 enables the Government to nominate up to nine additional politically neutral members for a term of two years. These members have restricted

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voting rights. However, these peripheral steps are not adequate to usher in democracy. Severe limitations on certain freedoms in the name of discipline, unity, order and security persist. The ruling party’s vote-share is gradually declining, yet it has been able to secure two-thirds majority in all the elections conducted so far. Singapore has steered its way towards economic development extremely well by providing abundant opportunities to the citizens, but limited political participation to the masses. Both Singapore and Malaysian leaders glorify “Asian values” or the “Asian democracy” which demand a measure of authoritarian policies as well as some curbs on the freedoms to check the disruptive tendencies in the society. Former Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew championed that cause vociferously.

Burma’s long isolation puts it at the different pedestal of development than the mainstream Southeast Asia. The largest country in the mainland continues to be governed by the military in one form or the other, since 1962. Earlier, it was military dominated socialist regime from 1962 to 1988 and since 1988-coup, it is more direct and complete military rule. The military-junta forestalled democracy in 1992 when the pro-democracy party, National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi won 325 out of 485 seats for the national legislature. The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) as the junta was known at that time set aside the results and disqualified, arrested and drove into exile many of the elected candidates.

A National Convention to draft a new Constitution was convened in 1993. However, no progress could take place and the convention was adjourned in March 1996 and remains in suspension. In November 1997, SLORC was dissolved and it was replaced by State Peace and Development Council (SDPC).\(^{88}\) This was an exercise in changing the nomenclature only but not the nature of the government.

Vietnam has experimented with economic liberalization with success in the last two decades, but it has not attempted political democratization so far. It is the second largest communist state today. Vietnam is governed by a single political party, the Vietnam Communist Party with the help of military-bureaucratic complex.\(^{89}\) Despite having the communist agenda, the party favours the liberalization of economy and emphasizes meritocracy in economic dealings as well as in administration. The growth is taking place and living standards of the people are rising continuously.\(^{90}\) The same principle applies here as in other parts of Southeast Asia viz., as long as a regime delivers, the people acquiesce and do not protest. Laos is also governed by a single communist political party.\(^{91}\) Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP) which directed a revolutionary movement first against the French colonial domination, and afterwards against the former monarchy.\(^{92}\) It got rid of monarchy and established its rule in 1975. The Vietnam communists have always supported the communist party of Laos. In December 1997, elections were held for the 99-seat National Assembly. Of

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88. Ibid. p. 844
those elected, seventeen of the candidates were army officers while only one was not a member of the ruling party.93

Despite so much diversity in the organization as well as functioning of the political systems of Southeast Asia, some common characteristics are also found. The strains of authoritarianism, in a more or less degree are found in all the political systems of the region. The region is known for formalizing the concept of ‘Asian Democracy,’ or ‘Guided Democracy’ as Sukarno called it. In this system, the government decides what is good for the people, the opposition is relatively less tolerated as opposition to the government is, perceived, or shown as opposition to the state. Freedoms are curbed in the name of security and public order. The so-called emphasis on “Asian Values” as well as the distinct quality of Asian culture and environment bring tolerance towards authority. A kind of ideology is created around realism that Asians need not copy the West as their own culture and conditions are so different.94

However, the remarkable thing is that the governments in the region have been able to provide a wide range of choices in the economic field but the range of choice is limited in the political sphere. The effective governance is valued much more than democracy, still the attitude of the leaders is generally not totalitarian or repressive even in non-democratic polities. The paternalistic attitude is common. However, the paternalistic or semi-authoritarian attitude of the rulers can also be explained, partly in context of precarious ethnic composition of these societies. Furthermore, it can be

explained, partly, in terms of acquiescence bred by the continuously rising wealth and living standards, and the stable conditions under which people hope to advance their material pursuits. However, the winds of change are blowing. Five nations have democratized, to a greater or lesser degree, since 1986. The region is better integrated today through the instrumentality of the ASEAN. They have learnt to build on the points of agreements and similarities, whereas to ignore the points of disagreements and dissimilarities.

**Economic Conditions**

The economic problems being faced and tackled by Southeast Asian countries are extremely formidable and challenging, particularly when seen within the frame of half a century, while the West took centuries to resolve the same kind of problems. They have to work within the constraints of colonial legacy and neo-colonial experiences too. The achievement, so far, has been tremendous. Development in Human Resources is remarkable. Illiteracy has been wiped out. The countries excel in providing technical education to their populace. Health facilities at the basic level are adequate. Unemployment and poverty rates are also low if compared to the other developing countries. However, the same is not true with all the countries of Southeast Asia. Numerous problems at the economic front pertaining to providing even basic amenities are yet to be addressed.\(^95\)

The experience with economic development is also variegated across the region. Thailand and Malaysia, though hit hardest by the currency crisis of late 1990’s quickly overcame that, while Indonesia is still recovering from its after-shocks. No doubt, the crisis brought steep downward trends in the economies of the region, but

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the recovery within a short period of time reflects their inner strength. Manufacturing is the backbone of these economies. Recently the share of intra-regional trade has increased manifold, which provides stability to the region-as a whole. The share of Indo-China and Myanmar in the trade is too small as compared to the other countries. Vietnam is expanding and liberalizing its industry and trade. Its per capita income was half than that of Indonesia in 1992, but today it appears to be fast catching up with Indonesia. The combined national income of Singapore and Malaysia equals Indonesia’s national income, although the size and population of these two countries is less than even one-sixth of Indonesia’s. Singapore with just an area of 224 sq miles and population of four million has gross national income greater than the incomes of Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam combined together [Table 2].

Singapore and Brunei have been adjudged as High Income countries by the World Development Report. No other country of the region has per capita even half than that of either Singapore or Brunei. On the other hand, five countries of the region occupy the status of low income countries (LICs). They are Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. Thailand and Philippines are lower middle-income countries (LMCs), while Malaysia alone comes in the upper middle income (UMC) group.96

The countries can be divided into two groups in terms of Human Development Index (HDI) ranking. All the LICs have ranks above hundred while the rest rank below hundred. The HDI ranking is consistent with the level of per capita income in these countries. The High Income countries of Singapore and Brunei have the highest

96. On the basis of average Gross National Income per capita in 2001, the countries with per capita of less than $745 or less were considered as LICs; with $746-$2975 as LMCs; with $2,976-$9205 as UMCs and with $9206 or above were called High Income countries. World Bank, World Development Report, 2002
ranking, followed by Malaysia, Thailand and Philippines [Table 3]. Except Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, all the others have nearly ninety percent or above literary rates. The contrast is starkest in terms of infant mortality rates. While Singapore and Malaysia have infant mortality rates of three and eight, in Cambodia and Laos, ninety seven and eighty seven children die per thousand live births [Table 3].
Table 1. The Demographic Profile of Southeast Asia

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>Kuala Lumpur</td>
<td>328,550</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>2.5</td>
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<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>Jakarta</td>
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<td>214.4</td>
<td>118</td>
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<td>Singapore</td>
<td>Singapore City</td>
<td>610</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>6726</td>
<td>2.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
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<td>77.2</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>2.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>Bangkok</td>
<td>510,890</td>
<td>61.6</td>
<td>120</td>
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<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>Rangoon (Yangoon)</td>
<td>657,550</td>
<td>48.2</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>1.8</td>
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<td>240</td>
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<td>176,520</td>
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<td>69</td>
<td>2.5</td>
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<tr>
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<td>230,800</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brunei</td>
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<td>5,270</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>65.5</td>
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### Table 2. The Economic Profile of Southeast Asia.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Billion of dollars</td>
<td>Billion of dollars</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2001)</td>
<td>Per capita dollars</td>
<td></td>
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<td>86.5</td>
<td>3,640</td>
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<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>144.7</td>
<td>680</td>
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<td>Singapore</td>
<td>99.4</td>
<td>24,740</td>
<td>100</td>
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<td>Philippines</td>
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<td>Thailand</td>
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<td>401</td>
<td>6,550</td>
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<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>410</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Laos</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>1,610</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brunei</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Indiab</td>
<td>473.3</td>
<td>460</td>
<td>2,530</td>
<td>2,450</td>
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</table>


aPurchasing Power Parity: The exchange rates between currencies do not reflect differences in relative prices within the countries. Therefore, PPP allows a standard comparison of real price levels between countries.

bChina and India have been included for the sake of comparison as the two neighbouring giants also started their independent course of development, more or less, at the same time, as the Southeast Asian countries.
Table 3. Human Development Index of Southeast Asia.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>HDI Ranking 2001</th>
<th>Life Expectancy at Birth 2001</th>
<th>Adult Literacy Rate % (Age 15 + above) 2001</th>
<th>Infant Mortality Rate (per thousand live births) 2001</th>
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