

Book Review: Vatikiotis, M. (2017). *Blood and Silk: Power and Conflict in Modern Southeast Asia*.

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Michael Vatikiotis' *Blood and Silk: Power and Conflict in Modern Southeast Asia* is an impassioned commentary on the state of affairs in a region that appears phenomenal for its rapid economic growth but at the same time perplexing because of intractable corruption and conflict. The author raises questions and highlights paradoxes regarding problems of governance and democratization and then tries to address these questions by citing colonial legacies and failures in institution building, as well as anecdotes from his experience as a journalist, mediator, student, and long-time observer of the region.

The book is divided into two sections. *Part I: Power* covers the geopolitical features and the long sweep of precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial history that has led to the present state of what he calls a "demi-democracy" (p. 295), characterized by a persistence of violence, personality-driven and clientelistic politics, pernicious graft and corruption, lack of institutional integrity, and little respect for laws. *Part II: Conflict* deals with what Vatikiotis considers the most pressing concerns for the region – unresolved conflicts borne of contested identities, growing religious sectarianism and extremism, and the (re)emergence of a powerful China that is "no longer hiding its strength" (p. 282).

Vatikiotis asks, for instance, why Southeast Asian countries rank poorly in freedom and good governance indices despite social and material progress, and why democracy has proven hard to establish. He dispels the notion that this is because social change has lagged behind political transformation, reasoning that Southeast Asians are better educated than ever. Instead, he points to the weak institutional roots of democratic reform and shallow, personality-based politics that drive change, if any. Related to this, he poses the often repeated but seldom satisfactorily answered question of why graft and corruption persist and offers several answers including the fact that governments are poorly financed, that bribery serves to maintain deeply entrenched social hierarchies, and that this ultimately serves to control the elite and fuel systems of patronage. This is consistent with much of the literature on Southeast Asia highlighting elite-driven, clientelistic, patronage relationships as characteristic of politics and governance in the region.

Vatikiotis' assessment of the influence of colonial legacies on the present state of affairs seems accurate, though not new to students of the region. "The seeds of subnational conflict lie in the process of modern state formation, which involved the disruption of precolonial autonomous principalities and the birth of the cohesive, centralised nation state" (p. 201), he writes of deeply rooted conflicts in

Southern Thailand and Aceh. “The shallow basis for this unity,” moreover, “was built on an administrative framework steeped in colonial exigency and historical prejudices. Imperfect integration and forced assimilation became the conductors of grievance that eventually generated violence [...] As new states struggled to establish themselves, rebellions erupted along poorly defined borders and fault lines of social and ethnic division” (p. 204). Indeed, contemporary fractures in Malaysia and Myanmar, for instance, can be traced back to the colonial administrative divisions under British rule, as discussed in most textbooks dealing with the colonial history of the region.

However, in attempting to distill conclusions about such a diverse region, Vatikiotis risks overly generalizing and seeing the region as more exceptional than it might be. Writing again about unresolved conflicts, Vatikiotis declares that motives ascribed to sovereignty only disguise selfish personal interest – compromise in Southeast Asia is seen as a sign of weakness and loss of face (p. 224). This however may be just as true in hierarchical societies of Northeast Asian countries with deep cultural sensitivities related to “losing face”. He writes of the “perpetual selfishness of Southeast Asian elites” (p. 286) and how, “more than any other part of the world today that claims to adhere for the most part to democratic principles of government and has the GDP to do so, Southeast Asia fails chronically to deliver on the promise of popular sovereignty” (p. 286). One might be harder pressed to identify any part of the world where elites unselfishly gave up power and delivered popular sovereignty at no cost to their privilege. Elsewhere, the author may verge on exaggeration. He describes Thailand as “a singularly archaic state” (p. 290) that has managed to perpetuate elite power and privilege through a strong military and much revered monarchy. Surely, there are other regions of the world where more antiquated practices survive even though Thailand’s military and monarchy are indeed profoundly influential if it were to be compared to modern liberal democracies.

This is perhaps one problem of Vatikiotis’ and many others’ approach to understanding Southeast Asia – the assumption that economic growth would lead to liberal values and democratic governance. Indeed, some contemporary academic discussions on the politics of Southeast Asia have evolved from asking why democratization has failed, to why nondemocratic forms of governance persist. In other words, much of the contemporary discourse has evolved to the question of durable authoritarianism – something that the author fails to mention.

The book takes the reader on a fascinating but exasperating journey informed by history and established scholarship on the politics of Southeast Asia. However, it does not necessarily reveal anything new or challenge any existing studies. Rather, it reads more like a personal lamentation by an ardent follower. “As someone who has never really felt attached to a particular country in the patriotic sense, watching the simple ceremony”, Vatikiotis writes of an independence day celebration in Indonesia, “I catch myself feeling a tinge of attachment, a desire to belong to this ambitious, somewhat improbable nation” (p. 288-289). Vatikiotis certainly does not pretend to be a detached observer but, in doing so, he may well convert a casual observer to a dedicated advocate for political change in such a pivotal region.

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