

Editorial: Sustainability, Governance, and Conflict

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ASEAS 18(1) delves into diverse and timely topics of Southeast Asia, featuring four current research papers, one research workshop article, and two book reviews. While this current issue covers four countries in the region – Laos, Indonesia, Thailand, and Singapore – the contributions coalesce around three overarching themes: (1) sustainability, (2) governance, and (3) conflict.

The theme of sustainability is approached from two distinct but interconnected perspectives. One focus lies in the intersection of tourism, service quality, and local communities, continuing ASEAS' engagement with sustainable development and tourism in the region (Rostami et al., 2024; Trupp & Dolezal, 2020). Although the SERVQUAL model (Ladhari, 2009) is widely used to assess service quality, its application in non-Western tourism contexts remains underexplored and little critiqued. Yet, service quality is a key dimension of sustainability in tourism, as it shapes visitor satisfaction, local community benefits, and the long-term viability of tourism products. Addressing this gap, the article by Sroyetch, Rangsungnoen, and Caldicott (this issue, 2025) employs reflective and co-creative longitudinal methods to critically examine how the SERVQUAL framework aligns with ASEAN homestay standards. Their study highlights how Thai homestays often struggle to meet international quality and sustainability standards, initially developed for hotels and guesthouses, and not always appropriate for rural community-based tourism. This disconnect not only affects sustainability certification but also influences guest perceptions, expectations, and ultimately the socio-economic resilience of homestay operators.

The theme of sustainability is further explored in the research workshop article by Jacobs and Chau (this issue, 2025), which shifts the focus from tourism in Thailand to food consumption practices in Singapore. Through an autoethnographic approach, the authors examine how Singaporeans perceive alternative protein foods – products that offer nutritional equivalence to conventional animal-based sources. Their study highlights the complex attitudes toward sustainable diets, revealing curiosity and resistance. Conversations and observations in Singapore uncover several reasons for hesitation, including a perceived lack of necessity for such alternatives and limited knowledge about their production processes. Some respondents also express skepticism about the

motives behind these products, viewing them as a manifestation of hyper-consumerism where marketed innovations are driven more by corporate profit than by genuine concern for environmental or public well-being.

The second theme of this issue is governance and is discussed in the works by Ponce (this issue, 2025) and Ubaidillah et al. (this issue, 2025). Ponce offers a critical counter-narrative to prevailing interpretations of China's engagement in Laos, particularly within the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), continuing recent discussions in ASEAS on the role of Chinese infrastructure in the region (Rowedder et al., 2024). Dominant discourses often frame Chinese infrastructure investments as instruments of so-called "debt-trap diplomacy" whereby China uses large loans to exert control over recipient countries. Ponce examines the construction of a Chinese dam in Northern Laos to reveal a more nuanced picture. He argues that Laos has adopted a hybrid governance strategy in its hydropower sector that emphasizes the economic rationale of dam construction and operation, deliberately minimizes the visibility of Chinese actors, and assigns primary responsibility for community relocation to domestic authorities. Despite some governance weaknesses, this approach, according to Ponce, has ultimately strengthened Laos's capacity for autonomous decision-making and planning in hydropower development.

In the second article on governance, Ubaidillah et al. (this issue, 2025) discuss the use of memes in changing politics in Indonesia. Memes and their usage in political campaigns have recently accelerated, and politicians across multiple countries have utilized this medium to influence the younger generation (Anderau & Barbarrusa, 2024; Rankawat, 2023). Ubaidillah et al. explore how digital natives in Indonesia engage with and are influenced by such visual content. By analyzing Indonesia's contemporary 'memescape,' the article uncovers how memes function as both expressions of popular culture and as instruments of political messaging. The authors argue that memes may enhance youth engagement but also risk deepening intergenerational political divides. Furthermore, they suggest that memes are subtle tools of elite control, shaping public discourse and influencing voter behavior through curated and emotionally charged narratives. This contribution offers a timely and critical lens on the intersections of digital culture, political communication, and governance in the region.

The third theme explored in this issue is conflict, approached through the lens of language and its entanglement with power in the article by Udasmoro and Kunz (this issue, 2025). Drawing on interviews and focus groups with diverse stakeholders, the authors investigate how language use in Indonesia reflects and reinforces social hierarchies, marginalization, and everyday experiences of exclusion. The article identifies specific mechanisms through which linguistic practices contribute to the normalization of discrimination, particularly in conflict-prone or post-conflict settings. At the same time, it highlights how language can also serve as a tool for peacebuilding when inclusive and dialogic forms of communication are intentionally cultivated. By foregrounding the socio-political dimensions of language, this contribution enriches our understanding of how power is enacted, challenged, and negotiated in Southeast Asian societies, and invites readers to consider the often-overlooked role of discourse in both perpetuating and transforming conflict dynamics.

Finally, this issue features two book reviews that complement the thematic and geographic breadth of the volume. Joseph Black reviews *A Sense of Place and Belonging*:

The Chiang Tung Borderland of Northern Southeast Asia by Karlsson (2025), which offers a compelling exploration of identity and spatial belonging in a historically complex region at the intersection of Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and China. Ladawan Khaikham reviews *Thailand: Contestation, Polarization, and Democratic Regression* by Prajak Kongkirati (2024), a timely analysis of political transformations and challenges to democratic governance in contemporary Thailand.



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DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflict of interest.