Editorial: Resistance, Critique, Hope. Global Crises and Southeast Asian Experiences

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RESISTANCE, CRITIQUE, HOPE. GLOBAL CRISES AND SOUTHEAST ASIAN EXPERIENCES

Directing scholarly attention to Southeast Asia in times of crisis is an inherently ambivalent undertaking. On the one hand, observers in the Global North frequently read the region as characterized by environmental degradation, consolidating authoritarianism and intensifying identity politics. On the other hand, communities across the region are actively developing and enacting new forms of resistance, above all against a future that may, at times, appear genuinely dystopian. It is precisely this disposition, which Terry Eagleton (2015) terms hope without optimism, that the present moment arguably demands.

Recent large-scale forest fires in Indonesia, increasingly destructive typhoons and floods, as well as droughts that grew even more extreme during the recent El Niño, the narrowing of democratic freedoms and civic space in Thailand and the Philippines, the mobilization of religion, ethnicity and nationalism for exclusionary politics, and the violence, armed conflict and humanitarian crisis that have engulfed Myanmar since the 2021 military coup reveal the region's diverse environmental and political challenges. These developments are by no means confined to the region but are bound up with global processes of climate change, democratic erosion and polarization that also manifest, in different forms, in the Global North. As rivers in Europe experience historic droughts and authoritarian right-wing actors such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD) or the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), and even the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement in the US gain ground, it becomes evident that these crises are shared rather than regional. Yet, struggles against authoritarianism can be successful, as the recent electoral success of Serbia's student-led protest movement, Lula's victory against Bolsonaro in Brazil, or the defeat of the illiberal right-wing Hungarian Civic Alliance (FIDESZ) shows. This makes dialogue between critical scholars in Southeast Asia and other parts of the world more important than ever. Such exchange can help not only to understand these developments but also to foster resistance and new forms of critique.

In this context, ASEAS shares critical insights, as ever, in open access format, reflecting our commitment not only to scholarly discourse but also to broader public debates. We hope that the research published here also finds its way beyond the ivory tower. The contributions to this issue address these challenges through empirically grounded case studies. Only if we

understand the concrete mechanisms of how identity, authoritarianism, or disaster management operate at the grassroots level can we engage with broader global challenges such as environmental crises, identity politics, or rising right-wing authoritarianism.

The article by Georg Bauer examines how the Tsao-hpas (Shan hereditary rulers) in late colonial Burma became important actors in the development of Shan national identity by demanding greater autonomy and emphasizing the distinctiveness of the Shan States from Burma. Rather than treating traditional rulers as merely self-interested 'feudal' elites who resisted modern nationalism, Bauer argues that their pursuit of autonomy helped produce and institutionalize a modern Shan national identity. This complicates conventional theories that see nationalism as primarily generated by educated middle classes, intellectuals, or anti-colonial movements.

The qualitative study by Karl Patrick R. Mendoza and colleagues investigates how people in Pasig City, Philippines, come to trust – or distrust – their local government in everyday life, focusing on the reformist administration of Mayor Vico Sotto. The authors argue that political legitimacy cannot be derived solely from the government's implementation of reforms, however well-designed; instead, residents continually judge the government through their everyday encounters with officials, services, infrastructure, and communication, based on expectations of fairness, responsiveness, accessibility, and personal connection.

Bendegúz Papp continues with a close analysis of the regional disaster diplomacy surrounding the 2013 Typhoon Haiyan, which caused more than 7,000 deaths and affected over 16 million people; in the Philippines alone, it caused about USD 10 billion in economic damage. By using the Complex Adaptive System (CAS) framework, the study evaluates how ASEAN states cooperated across disaster prevention, emergency response, and recovery. The Philippines in particular struggled, while Vietnam's stronger preventive evacuation efforts resulted in far fewer deaths. The study argues that ASEAN's principle of non-interference and respect for national sovereignty constrained regional cooperation, which produced a paradox: while ASEAN officially presented its disaster diplomacy as successful, the practical relief and recovery efforts were relatively ineffective, making Haiyan a missed diplomatic opportunity.

New forms of authoritarianism in Southeast Asia have sparked lively debates among political scientists, as current developments stand in contrast to historical developments. The article by Kevin Nilsen Agojo and Ador R. Torneo contributes to these debates by examining the current political role and struggles of civil society in the Philippines. Historically, Philippine civil society played a major role in democratization, for instance during the People Power movements. It is surprising, therefore, that under Duterte, civil society struggled to mobilize. As the authors show, this was due to internal fragmentation, red-tagging, legal harassment, COVID-19 pandemic policies, electoral manipulation, and online disinformation. In addition, the government used populist narratives to portray human-rights organizations and critics as sympathetic to criminals or rebels. Despite these challenges, civil society, as the authors demonstrate, developed alternative forms of resistance, including community pantries, digital legal services, electoral activism, and new governance-focused organizations. The article argues that Philippine civil society remains resilient by strengthening alliances and grassroots engagement.

Turning to regional economic cooperation, Nurul Jannah Kosor and Paul J. Carnegie examine how halal industry cooperation between Brunei and Thailand opens up possibilities for economic diversification while revealing uneven conditions of access to global markets. Drawing on ten interviews with regulatory authorities, diplomatic officials, and industry actors, alongside documentary sources, the authors show that Brunei's religious credibility and strin-

gent certification standards do not automatically translate into international recognition or export opportunities. Cooperation with Thailand offers potential complementarities through its industrial capacity, logistics, and established market access, but regulatory and institutional barriers constrain these prospects. By approaching halal governance as a form of regulatory power and economic diplomacy, the article highlights how small states negotiate development futures within global frameworks that both enable and restrict their participation.

The article by Pinkaew Laungaramsri challenges the prevailing characterization of Thailand as a "non-reading society", arguing that the perceived reading crisis stems not from a lack of reader interest but from structural imbalances in the institutions that support reading culture. Using the concept of the literary ecosystem, it examines the interplay between schools, publishing markets, and digital platforms, highlighting how popular genres and online communities sustain reading practices while institutional shortcomings constrain literary diversity and access to reading resources.

In addition to the research articles, this open issue features three book reviews. Timo Duile focuses on Saskia Schäfer's (2026) recently published monograph *Mobilizing Mainstream Islam*, which discusses the role of mainstream Islam in the emergence of religious nationalism in post-reformasi Indonesia. This is a timely read for those intrigued by the social and political dynamics of a religion that has long figured as a stimulating reference for pluralist frameworks of the state but has in recent decades experienced, in the words of Schäfer (2026, p. 191), stifling "bureaucratization" and "homogenization" to facilitate what Schäfer terms in the title of her book a "politics of orthodoxy" at the expense of minorities. In his review of *Ruling Indonesia*, Rakhmat Hidayat offers a generous introduction to Marcus Mietzner's (2026) newest monograph and positions the book within the recent literature on Indonesia's ruling elite and the phenomenon of democratic backsliding. Mietzner, once again, presents a convincing argument to the scholarly community by linking Jokowi's developmentalism to the gradual institutional erosion under his presidency. Moreover, Ralph Chan delivers a detailed overview of Rainer Werning and Jörg Schwieger's (2025) anthology *Von Marcos zu Marcos* (in English, *From Marcos to Marcos*). Known for their handbook on the Philippines (Werning & Schwieger, 2019), the authors compile a variety of short essays aiming at a solid thematic scope that is also relative to the authors' long-term expertise and engagement in and with the country. Taken together, these book reviews affirm ASEAS's commitment to scholarly exchange that both informs and stimulates further inquiry. Finally, Tristan Aidan Pennell reviews Preedee Hongsaton's and Ying-Kit Chan's (2025) edited *New Directions in Thai Studies*, which expands the field of Thai Studies through diverse historical perspectives and innovative approaches, particularly sensory studies. While recognizing the volume's high value for scholars and students, he questions its uneven critique of Western hegemony and argues for more context-sensitive approaches that avoid essentializing Thai and Western perspectives.

Summarizing, the contributions to this issue show that crisis in Southeast Asia is never merely a story of decline. In tracing how communities, civil society actors and scholars contest, negotiate and reimagine the conditions they face, they offer precisely the kind of hope without optimism with which we began. We trust that this issue will stimulate further dialogue between scholars in Southeast Asia and beyond, and that it will help sustain the critical engagement the present moment demands.

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DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflict of interest.