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Party System Institutionalization in Asia: Democracies, Autocracies, and the Shadows of the Past

ALLEN HICKEN and ERIK MARTINEZ KUHONTA, eds.

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In pluralist and conservative perspectives, political parties in democracies are important as essential representative links between citizens and the state. In these perspectives, political parties provide a means of collecting, interpreting, and channeling citizen's interests into the political system. Where they fail, democracy is threatened. Yet parties may also be important for authoritarian regimes as many of these hold elections. Authoritarian leaders may also use parties to mobilize people in support of the regime. By all accounts, then, parties are politically significant. That being the case, understanding party and party system institutionalization allows for analytical distinctions to be drawn between regimes, sometimes being used as a proxy measure of political development.

Allen Hicken and Erik Martinez Kuhonta take on party and party system institutionalization in an ambitious and rich collection of 12 country case studies and two theoretical chapters. With an analytical lens focused on Asia, the editors begin by challenging the abovementioned presumed link between democracy and the institutionalization of political parties and/or party systems (pp. 4, 17). They define institutionalized parties as "coherent, adaptable, and complex institutions" that channel citizen demands and hold government accountable (p. 3), and they consider nondemocratic regimes as "particularly important in shaping party system institutionalization" (p. 4). It is because it "provides a sharp contrast" that they see Asia as a useful testing ground for assumptions about institutionalization (p. 4).

The Asian cases presented in the collection suggest several conclusions to the editors. First, that more elections do not necessarily mean enhanced institutionalization (pp. 11–12). Second, they consider the cases in the collection do not suggest any "straightforward general relationship of macro political institutions . . . with institutionalization" (p. 12). Third, they conclude that the assumed relationship between fractionalization and party and political volatility is much more mixed for the Asian cases (pp. 12–13). Fourth, they found that parties that institutionalized earlier tend to have greater longevity and higher institutionalization than parties that were formed later. While this might seem like a tautology, the institutionalist claim is that "path dependence" is critical (p. 13). Fifth, the Asian cases tend to suggest that institutionalization has been greatest where authoritarian "legacies" are strongest (p. 14). This leads to the "somewhat . . . troubling conclusion" that authoritarian antecedents are important (pp. 15–16). These points suggest a need for a reconsideration of party and party system institutionalization to account for the findings on authoritarianism and party system institutionalization (p. 17). These conclusions are taken up in the final, reflective chapter 14, by Scott Mainwaring.

Each of the country cases is crafted by area and country specialists. This might seem logical, and yet it is of some significance when considering the nature of political science research in recent years. Hicken and Kuhonta were both involved in the production of *Southeast Asia in Political Science: Theory, Region, and Qualitative Analysis* (Kuhonta *et al.* 2008), which made a case for area expertise in a discipline that was increasingly dominated by big, comparative, statistics-driven studies. In many ways, this book is meant to demonstrate the insights and learning that are achieved when country specialists bring their in-depth knowledge to bear on a “big” political science question, in this case, party system institutionalization. The overall result is a set of thoughtful and insightful studies influenced by historical institutionalist perspectives that, as noted above, suggest conclusions that might not have been seen if each of the cases had been quantified and manipulated in a large multi-country study.

More than this, each chapter also reflects on shortcomings in the theoretical literature on and conceptualization of party and party system institutionalization. Indeed, in the first country case, on Malaysia, Meredith Weiss points out that the country’s political parties bear all the hallmarks of institutionalization, including considerable competition between parties (p. 25). Yet knowing this tells us remarkably little about the forces that shape Malaysian politics. It is remarkable that, for several decades, competitive parties have persisted, yet post-colonial Malaysia has seen no opposition party win an election. The constraints placed on opposition lead Weiss to a call for the deinstitutionalization of parties, seeing institutionalization as an obstacle for democratic development (pp. 26, 45).

Likewise, when Netina Tan looks at Singapore in chapter 3, she sees nothing but People’s Action Party (PAP) domination. As a result, her focus is on internal structures of the party and its leadership succession. So hegemonic is the PAP that its “institutionalization” squeezes out other parties to the extent that they become irrelevant to the analysis of party institutionalization. Opposition parties have been unable to institutionalize but this observation is trite without recognizing that their lack of institutionalization and processes of deinstitutionalization have been PAP strategy. The PAP’s longevity also allows it to monopolize the state apparatus and manage the law (p. 55).

In limiting dissent and constraining and controlling competition, the PAP has similarities with the communist parties of Vietnam (chapter 6 by Tuong Vu) and China (chapter 7 by Yongnian Zheng). While Vietnam and China are single-party dictatorships, in terms of organizational structure, recruitment, repression, and party institutionalization, the commonalities with the PAP are strong, prompting both Vu and Tan to draw on theoretical concerns first developed by Samuel Huntington. Zheng might easily have drawn on Huntington as well, but prefers to focus on claims that the party has “hegemonized” and institutionalized while managing to accommodate elements of “rising civil society” (pp. 183–185) and still holding onto power (p. 166). These processes, Zheng suggests, make China an evolving political system that is different from the West (p. 185), but

shows “strong parallels” with other Asian cases with dominant parties, mentioning Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Taiwan (p.168). On Vietnam, Vu considers this variety of single-party accommodation as a struggle to maintain party dominance while also deinstitutionalizing and liberalizing (pp. 142, 158).

Zheng mentions Taiwan as a comparator for China, perhaps thinking of the period of Nationalist/Kuomintang dictatorship. Yet Taiwan is different in that it has achieved a competitive two-party system. In chapter 5, Tun-jen Cheng and Yung-min Hsu explain this process while also observing that this results in challenges, warning that the “highly institutionalized party system seems to have reinforced political polarization . . .” (p. 109). Other examples of recent democratization are discussed in the book. In chapter 11, Joseph Wong hails South Korea as an economic and political success story while noting that there have been and remain challenges for democratization. Not least, the party system is said to remain “uninstitutionalized” (p. 261) and with voters exhibiting little loyalty to parties. Indonesia (chapter 10, by Paige Johnson Tan) is usually considered to be one of the electoral democratization success stories despite a lack of institutionalization (p. 236). The Philippines (chapter 13, by Hicken), has a long history of parties and elections, yet is considered “under-institutionalized,” and subject to elite domination, poor governance, and public disillusionment. Taiwan, South Korea, and Indonesia might have problems, yet each has had some democratic successes. Less successful in these terms is Cambodia, discussed by Sorpong Peou (chapter 9), who says that “democratic institutionalization . . . has now given way to authoritarian institutionalization” (p. 232).

The two countries usually identified as resilient and long-standing democracies are Japan and India. Writing on Japan, Kenneth Mori McElwain (chapter 4) emphasizes changes over the long history of political parties in the country. He suggests that party program differences are becoming more significant for voters, meaning that personalism is being reduced. Despite this, the conservative Liberal Democratic Party has held power for all but two relatively brief periods since 1955, suggesting that it has successfully adapted to the changes over the post-War period. Chapter 8 on India by Csaba Nikolenyi begins by engaging in a little debate with the editors. Nikolenyi argues that authoritarianism in India resulted in deinstitutionalization for the leading party; voters are losing confidence in parties; and that India’s voting system and anti-defection rules has seen decreased electoral volatility despite an increased number of parties.

The perennial failure in this set of countries—in terms of party and party system institutionalization and democratization—is Thailand, as discussed by Kuhonta (chapter 12). In May 2014, Thailand reverted to a military dictatorship for the second time since 2005. Thailand’s 12th successful coup saw it developing its 20th constitution since 1932. In this context, it is hardly surprising that Kuhonta refers to Thailand’s political parties as “feckless.” Oddly, military intervention is only considered one of five possible explanations for low institutionalization, with Kuhonta favoring an explanation that sees parties as failing to entrench social cleavages in the party system

(pp. 281–282). He locates the “critical junctures” that have allowed the control of parties by elites. Examining the 1930s and immediate post-World War II periods, Kuhonta explains that parties have been dominated by “personalism, factionalism, and feckless organizations” (p. 283).

With such a divergence of experience across the Asian cases, Mainwaring’s concluding chapter should be a welcome addition to the collection. However, his conclusion that the main differences in the cases are between competitive, hegemonic, and party-state systems (p. 328) left this reader underwhelmed. While he reasserts the significance of studying party institutionalization, this reader was struck by some of Hicken’s words at the end of his chapter on the Philippines: “Why should we care about the level of institutionalization? We can observe differences in the level of institutionalization from country to country, but does it really matter for things we ultimately care about?”

Hicken’s answer is that it does matter, for democratic consolidation and good governance (p. 324). After reading this collection, however, I am not so easily convinced. Institutionalists study institutions with such intensity that they sometimes risk losing sight of the societies that give rise to the institutions they scrutinize. This risks missing the ways in which institutions are structured and their relationships with each other. While this is not a criticism of all of the country cases in this collection, it is true that there are too few references to institutions as sites of political struggles. The power of oligarchs and elites are mentioned in several papers and some authors do consider social cleavages, historical trajectories, and critical junctures. Yet the notion that institutions are sites of intense struggle and are shaped by conflicts over social, political, and economic power is curiously lost in discussions of institutionalization.

That basic criticism aside, the country studies of political parties in the Asian region will be useful for readers, especially as there is a theoretical coherence to the chapters, unusual in an edited collection. This adds weight to the idea that country expertise is invaluable when dealing with socially-embedded institutions. The theoretical chapters are likely to be of great interest to party institutionalization aficionados while adding Asian cases to a theoretical literature dominated by Europe and Latin America is as necessary as it is welcome.

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