

Book Review

Power Broking in the Shade: Party Finances and Money Politics in Southeast Asia, by Wolfgang Sachsenroder. Singapore: World Scientific, 2018, ix, 191pp.

Wolfgang Sachsenroder, an independent researcher, has authored an important study of a controversial and topical subject, namely the rapidly escalating monetisation of politics in Southeast Asia. This book's primary contribution is that it offers a constructive comparative appraisal of modes of employment of money during elections in a region where they are regularly held in a free though not necessarily fair manner.

This study of the financing of politics explores core matters such as the incestuous relationship between politics and business – and in its different forms – as well as patron-client relations that are created to consolidate power within a party and draw support from the electorate. One dimension of this nexus between politics and business is that political parties own companies, while another is that state-owned enterprises (SOEs) are abused to function as brokers. They are instruments politicians employ to channel funds to key constituencies to muster or consolidate electoral support.

Meanwhile, business people, particularly those who own large enterprises, actively fund parties as an avenue to gain access to the shaping of public policies to serve their vested corporate interests. This study notes the presence of illicit funds during elections, though its volume and the degree to which it is used is unknown. Also noted, but inadequately analysed, is how businessmen, including those once reputedly crony capitalists, are joining or creating parties, using them to capture control of the government, a trend emerging after the end of authoritarian rule. This issue merits more thought because, with the rise of self-financing candidates, 'state capture' has occurred, contributing to severe political crises in Thailand, which eventually resulted in the return of military rule.

This study draws attention to another significant issue that undermines fair elections, namely the use of slush funds by politicians. Politicians also have access to substantial foreign funding, not necessarily an illegal political financing act in many countries, but one that tends to be covert, thus deeply undermining the conduct of fair elections. In this regard, more evaluation was required about caps on funds given to and spent by parties to control the inflow of money into electoral contests. This is a contentious issue as academics are divided as to whether there should be a limit on income and expenditure by parties during elections.

A related matter is that politicians with access to money are also privy to the ‘selection effect’. That is, they can determine who stands during an electoral contest. Since there is little or no checks and balances in the selection process, and the quality of candidates on offer to the electorate during elections is poor. In this context, candidates facing serious allegations of corruption are still nominated to run in elections, in numerous cases returning to power. Another concern about the ‘selection effect’ is that it contributes to the consolidation of power of incumbents, deeply undermining attempts to produce capable representatives who can ensure that their party produces viable policy programmes.

Since Sachsenroder notes a range of issues in his assessment of the financing of politics in Southeast Asia, he begins his study with a long discussion about political corruption. Much attention is devoted to how political corruption has manifested, contributing inevitably to numerous scandals which explains why the title of this book is ‘power-broking in the shade’.

A major problem of covert power-broking in political financing is that it suggests that political financing is a corrupt act; a widespread perception that must be debunked. Sachsenroder argues that parties need access to funds if they are to function effectively. He devotes attention to avenues open to parties to raise money, which he suggests do not allow them access to sufficient funds to mount well-run campaigns. However, his focus on political corruption diverts attention from an in-depth assessment of the reforms required to ensure equitable financing of parties.

Moreover, since his focus is on power-broking, an important question arises: where does power lie in different countries in Southeast Asia? Related questions include how this power is employed, and if it is shared? These questions are important because the nature of the state in Southeast Asian countries varies significantly. There are powerful single dominant party states in Singapore, Vietnam and Cambodia – and Malaysia before a regime change occurred in May 2018. Business elites are influential in Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia. Recent studies note the rise of oligarchs after the emergence of democracy in Indonesia. However, while powerful business elites can shape the conduct of elections by endorsing candidates or even running for public office, they have not been able to capture power in democratic Indonesia and the Philippines, so evident in the rise of Joko Widodo and Rodrigo Duterte respectively, a puzzle that is not analysed in this study.

As for the chapters on each country in this book, there is an imbalance in the volume of information provided. There are lengthy chapters on Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines, while studies about Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar are rather slim. Evidently, much

research is still required of political financing in Indo-China countries. To address this issue, academics must build on Sachsenroder's work.

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