Economic Satisfaction and Political Loyalty In Southeast Asia*

Joseph B. Tamney, Ph. D.
Department of Sociology, Ball State University.

The relation between economic satisfaction and political stability has been frequently discussed in social science literature. For instance, Dave (1962) has argued that a revolution is more likely when economic progress is followed by an economic reversal. Moore (1966) suggested the broader idea that any sudden economic change for the worse can result in a revolution. The idea that economic loss can lead to political instability seems broadly accepted.

But what about the relation between economic gain and political stability? Does prosperity increase the probability of stability? This is the basic question to which this article is addressed.

Specifically we want to test two hypotheses: 1) the more economically satisfied a person, the higher the person's political loyalty; our assumptions are that one of the main criteria for evaluating a government is its ability to produce a satisfying economic situation, and that successful governments will receive the loyalty of their citizens; and 2) the validity of the first hypothesis will decline as social class increases, i.e. hypothesis one will be more strongly confirmed the lower the social class of the respondents; our assumption is that as social class increases people see their economic success as being more due to their family and friends and less to government, therefore among the upper class, economic success does not produce as much appreciation of the government as occurs among the lower class.

The Study

The research involved the study of 1,437 students at the following universities, University of the Philippines (date collected, August 1969), Nommensen University, Medan, Sumatra (April 1970) Sriwidjaja University, Palembang, Sumatra (August 1970), Nanyang University and the University of Singapore (May-June, 1970). At each university students were given a self-administered questionnaire. At the Sumatran universities the questionnaire was in Indonesian, at Nanyang University it was in Chinese. At the other universities it was in English. At the University of the Philippines, Nanyang University and the University of Singapore I helped in administrating almost all the questionnaires. At Sriwidjaja the questionnaire was administered by several staff members to one large class. Most of the students at Sriwidjaja were in military uniform, being in the process of receiving military training as part of their university programme. At Nommensen the questionnaire was administered by a senior student with the help of a faculty member. For most people the questionnaire took from 45 minutes to 1½ hours to complete, except in the Indonesian universities where some of the students took 2½ hours to complete the questionnaire.

1. Sorokin (1966:601-604) has questioned the adequacy of Davis' analysis.
2. I would like to express my appreciation for the help received in translating the questionnaire from the following persons: Sartono Kartodirdjo, Mohd, Rosjid Manan, M.A. Nawawi, John Buton, William Liddle, James Peacock, Chuih Toh Chai, Chiew Seen Kong, and Miss Wong Cheng Yeng. Both the Indonesian and Chinese versions of the questionnaire were back-translated and modified before being used. Of course, the translations may not be perfect; for instance, some minor modifications were not re-backtranslated.

* I would like to thank the following people for their invaluable help in carrying out this project: Bernie Go, Amudi Pasaribu, Johannes Erwin, J.C. Tamba, Junus Umrie and Chuih Toh Chai. Many other people were helpful; I wish I had the space to list them all. Financial or material assistance was received from the following: The Ateneo de Manila Research Council, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Nanyang University), COEMAR, United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., and the Lee Foundation (Singapore).
The students tended to come from the social science faculties. The Philippines sample is the most diversified from an academic point-of-view. On the other hand, all the students at the Indonesian universities were from either Economics or Business Administration.

Most of the students filled out the questionnaire during a class period. But in some cases students completed questionnaires under supervision but outside class hours. A very small number of students completed the questionnaires in an unsupervised situation.

Since our sample was composed of students it seemed meaningless to ask about their satisfaction with their present economic situation. Instead we asked about the future. Specifically, the students were asked in the English questionnaire: "How likely is it that you will get the kind of job you want after you finish your education?" The responses were: "I am sure I will get the kind I want," "I am almost sure I will get the kind I want," "I may get the kind I want, but I doubt it," and "It is unlikely that I will get the kind I want." Except in analysing the total sample, the last two categories were combined; only about 4% chose the last response. The remainder of the responses were about evenly distributed among the other three responses.

Political loyalty was measured by the respondents' willingness to sacrifice for their government. The actual questions used were part of a set of six questions. The set was introduced as follows: "At times national governments demand sacrifices from the people. To achieve their political and economic goals, political leaders must sometimes ask much from their people. Which of the following things would you be willing to give up in order to help your national government achieve its objectives?" For this paper we have analyzed data from three of the questions that followed that statement: 1) "Would you be willing to give up or to lose a respected position in your community which you had earned by years of hard work to help your government?" 2) "Would you be willing to give your life to help your government?" and 3) "Would you give up a good job (or have your husband give up a good job) to help your government?" Each question was followed by three responses: I am sure I would be willing, I probably would be willing, I do not think I would be willing.

More specifically, then, our first hypothesis should be stated as follows: the more certain people are that they will get the kind of job they want, the more willing they will be to sacrifice for their national government.

The measure of social class is based on the occupation of the "main breadwinner" in the family. If this person was retired or unemployed the respondent was instructed to answer in terms of the last job of the breadwinner. The question listed seventeen possible occupations plus a space for writing in a category not already listed. For this analysis we combined the occupation categories into three groups, in parenthesis is the percentage of respondents who chose each category: Class I — professional in private practice (7%), professional in government service (6), educator (6), religious worker (1), owner or senior official of business firm, bank, construction firm, etc. (15), government official (7), farm or plantation owner (6), other professional or business people (1); Class II — government clerk or service worker (3), office worker (8), other white collar worker (1); Class III — supervises others outside an office, e.g. inspector, foreman (2), quality inspector (1), fixes or makes things, e.g. mechanic, electrician, tailor, cook, etc. (4), sells things, e.g. merchant, trader, shop or restaurant owner (16), sells things, e.g. hawker, shop or restaurant, worker (4), driver e.g. taxi, bus, car, truck, trishaw (2), farm or plantation worker (6), laborer (2). Almost 6% of the respondents did not answer the question. Class II has too few cases to analyze, so we concentrated on comparing Class I and Class III. It should be noted that Class III is not really a lower class sample; for instance only 2% came from families where the breadwinner is a labourer. We suggest only that Class III is lower than Class I in terms of a combination of prestige and economic return.

3. This question was originally developed by Douglas Murray while doing research in Singapore. The categories were chosen with Southeast Asia specifically in mind.