Book Reviews

Michele Ford (ed.)


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Michele Ford has succeeded in collecting a comprehensive range of essays about various forms of activism in Southeast Asia. Ford argues that because scholarly work on activism has primarily drawn on case studies from the more developed world, that is where theoretical considerations have arisen. The essays draw on a ‘smorgasbord of analytical concepts’ (p. 11), collectively provided by a combination of models and theories dealing with social movements. These include framing theory, the Political Process theory, and the transnational approach. The relevance of this combined approach is soon made clear through a number of carefully considered case studies that follow.

The book begins with the larger questions of the forms of social and political activism in Southeast Asia through a chapter by Garry Rodan that builds on a model he and Jayasuriya developed on forms of activism under different kinds of political regimes. He shows the diversity of activism that is possible even under authoritarian regimes and explores the shapes this activism may take under those circumstances. The book then analyses two significant political forces in Southeast Asia, namely the Free Aceh Movement and the Philippines Communist Party, which powerfully influenced activist movements in Aceh and the Philippines. Edward Aspinall examines the evolution of the Free Aceh Movement into a political movement after the peace treaty with the Indonesian government, and Vincent Boudreau charts how organizations, some of which had previous links with the Philippines Communist Party, have negotiated the democratic terrain in the Philippines post Marcos. From this larger perspective, the book then focuses on a micro level, both in approach and in the case studies. These chapters, firmly rooted in organizational case studies,
are very rich and detailed. Labour activism in Thailand, in trade unions as well as non-government organizations, is discussed in an essay by Dennis Arnold, and in another essay by Andrew Brown and Sakdina Chatrakul Na Ayudhya. The vexing issue of sexuality in Malaysia and corresponding activism by those in the Malaysian group Seksualiti Merdeka (Sexuality Independence) is discussed in Julian Lee’s essay about the rise and banning of this organization. Larissa Sandy discusses how the rights of sex workers in Cambodia are affected by globalized discourses on sex work, followed by American laws on preventing human trafficking, which have disproportionately affected sex workers in developing countries.

As amply highlighted by Sandy’s chapter, a particularly appealing aspect of this collection is the examination by many of the authors, of the interplay between the global and the local. The chapters highlight that it is not possible to conclude that activism in Southeast Asia is either wholly transnationalized or firmly rooted in a local context. Thushara Dibley’s discussion of ‘peace building’ work in Timor Leste in the aftermath of the crisis in the Timor Leste defense forces highlights this tension that sometimes exists between internationally framed (and funded) activities and the construction of a social movement, in this case a peace movement. The prospect of the rise of a social movement can sometimes be sufficiently unsettling of the status quo for it not to be supported easily by international donors. Therefore peace building is cast within the framework of modifying individual behaviour and containing conflict above all else. Nicola Edwards’ chapter on the Indonesian organic agriculture movement also looks at transnational and local dynamics. She examines the relationship between local farmer organizations and an international organization such as Via Campesina. She argues that greater institutionalization of activist organizations and their work does not necessarily equate to their decreasing ability to engage in social activism.

A wide variety of activism is represented in this collection. For example Lenore Lyons’ chapter on competing (yet at times converging) visions of women’s role in Singapore through a case study of a leadership struggle in the women’s organization AWARE shows that activism comes in many colours. Campaigning that seeks to pull adherents in the direction of supporting a more conservative agenda should also therefore be included in our conception of activism. This is a highly thought-provoking collection of essays, although at times the wide range of case studies across several countries discussed here is demanding for the reader. A work such as this will become a valuable historical document, capturing a snapshot of activism in the region during a certain