Political Parties and Clientelism in Southeast Asia

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If one would have to pick a single word to describe the nature of Southeast Asian politics, then ‘clientelism’ would be a good contender—with perhaps ‘oligarchy’ as a close runner-up. The study of political clientelism—the practice of exchanging a personalized, non-policy based access to money and state resources for electoral support—has a long and venerable history in the study of Southeast Asian polities. Democratization processes have lent this history a new chapter: democratic elections from Indonesia, the Philippines to Cambodia and Thailand have fostered an enthusiastic adoption of vote buying or selective distribution of state resources as means to garner electoral support. ‘Money politics’ often trumps ideology, and personal, clientelistic networks trump party discipline. The pervasiveness of clientelistic exchanges is posing considerable challenges for political parties, in various ways: vote buying is depleting their coffers, clientelistic clans foster factionalism, and shady deals with corporate campaign donors are undermining their popularity.

Political clientelism also poses considerable challenges for the *study* of political parties. From Duverger’s early classic (1959) onwards, much of the literature on political parties implicitly assume political parties to ‘programmatic’, inferring that they compete for the voter’s favour by offering a program of ideas and policy proposals. This literature hardly offers a systematic study of political par-
ties that largely—or partly, as parties often mix strategies—attract voters by offering personal favours like jobs, money, or access to public services. When such parties do get mentioned, they are often discussed in comparison with programmatic parties, as not-yet-programmatic parties. As a result the western literature on political parties and their focus on competition in a ‘marketplace of ideas’ is somewhat unsatisfying for those wanting to understand and compare parties in Southeast Asia—or, for that matter, South Asia, Africa, or South America. Isn’t it possible to study clientelistic political parties in their own right, using theoretical frameworks that are not derived from American or European experiences of state and party building?

Two recent books on political parties in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand illustrate the importance and the challenges involved in the study of clientelistic political parties. The books not only illustrate differences of opinions among scholars—which, in itself, is merely a sign of lively, healthy academic debate—but also the difficulties of finding appropriate theoretical frameworks to study political parties that are simply not very interested in doing what they are supposed to do, namely translating societal demands into policies and laws. Yes, political parties engage in such programmatic politics, too—particularly in the form of populist policies that provide subsidized healthcare, education and other subsidies to the poor. But political parties in these countries mix such electoral appeals—in varying ratios—with the personalized, clientelistic distribution of money and state resources through complex networks of brokers. How can we understand the different forms this clientelistic politics takes, why it takes these forms, and what effects has it on the organization and functioning of political parties?

The value of *Party Politics in Southeast Asia*, the edited volume that Dirk Tomsa and Andres Ufen put together lies in the way in which its essays stimulate reflection on the similarities and differences between political parties in Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia. One of the recurring themes in the essays is the argument that political clientelism fosters organizational shallowness of political parties and, as Paige Tan argues, anti-party attitudes. In this book we read how in the Philippines political parties are merely a front for its constituting clans and ‘clientelist clusters’ that often switch party loyalty (Teheannek). We read how local party organizations in Thailand are largely absent (Sirivunnabood) and dependent on personal networks of ‘chao pho’ or local bosses (Bjarnegard). Even Indonesia parties, considered relatively more institutionalized, are weakening. After the country adopted direct elections for governors and district heads (and, in 2008 an open-list system of proportional representation for legislative elections), political parties have become more dependent on the charisma, funds, and networks of individual candidates.