For many years now, the countries of Southeast Asia, with two exceptions, have exhibited stable political regimes. Autocrats seem particularly persistent in this part of the world. This is exactly what makes it so interesting for transformation research.

Democratic Failures
The “third wave” of democratisation has also left its mark in Southeast Asia. Between 1986 and 2002, democratization processes occurred in six of the eleven states in the region. But hopes that democracy would make a triumphant march through the region like it did in Latin America have not been fulfilled. The failure of the democracy movement in Myanmar (1990) and the collapse of the fragile democracy in Cambodia (1997), the erosion of democratic standards in the Philippines and the military coup of 2006 in Thailand all allow for the conclusion that democratic development in Southeast Asia is in crisis at the beginning of the 21st century. Indonesia is the only country in which the democratic system seems somewhat secure, though here too it cannot be described as a consolidated liberal democracy. Additionally, there are currently few substantiated signs that democratic change is likely to take place anytime soon in the autocratically governed states of the region.

These developments present challenges to both political science research and practical development work. From a scientific perspective, it becomes a question of possible explanations. For practical efforts, the issue at hand is what this means in concrete terms for development efforts and in particular for promoting good governance and democracy.

This brief report focuses on the first question, though it also attempts to provide information for interested practitioners. Based on a short overview of the topography of the political regimes in Southeast Asia, we will comment on the explanatory power of the currently most important theoretical lines of democratization research for the region and link these with some consideration of the prospects for the development of democracy and dictatorship in the region.

The state of democracy and dictatorship
Political science makes a distinction between the power structures found in the two basic forms: democracy and autocracy. In democracies, access to power is regulated by sufficiently competitive elections. In contrast, autocracies rule from within themselves. Additionally newer approaches to democracy and democratization research differentiate between liberal and defective democracies. The core of this distinction centres on questions of the functionality of the institutions of the modern democratic constitutional state.

Autocracy research on the other hand differentiates among the type and reach of the exercise of power (totalitarian and authoritarian regimes), the rulers (monarchies, military regimes, and party regimes), and the level of political competition that authoritarian regimes allow, along with the conditions of competition under which such contests take place (“closed” and “electoral authoritarianism”). Currently three groups of political regimes can be identified in Southeast Asia. With two exceptions, these country classifications have been stable for over a decade:

- The group of “defective democracies” consists of three states which have undergone a political transition to democracy in the past 25 years and not reverted to authoritarian rule since: the Philippines, Indonesia and East Timor. There are, however, considerable differences among these young democracies with respect to stability and quality.

- The group of “electoral autocracies” includes Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore and, very recently, Thailand and Myanmar. While in Malaysia the opposition at least has the possibility of challenging the governing party to a limited extent during elections, in Singapore there is no political authority that could threaten the power monopoly of the ruling People’s Action Party. The authoritarian re-
Regime in Cambodia allows a limited amount of political competition, though its reign has increasingly taken on hegemonial characteristics over the last decade. The holding of (not free and unfair) parliamentary elections in Myanmar in 2010 is an indication that the governing generals are attempting to transition from direct military rule to a form of “electoral authoritarianism” in which the army exercises power indirectly, that is from behind the façade of a civil government. The extent of the deficits of the democracy in Thailand was revealed in spring 2010 when the army high command ordered oppositional protests in the capital Bangkok shot down. The political regime can also be classified as authoritarian based on the wide reaching intervention methods available to the democratically illegitimate institutions around the monarchy. This assessment endures even after the 2011 elections when the former opposition took office.

- The group of “closed autocracies” which allow no limited political competition on a national level currently includes three states: the absolute monarchy of Brunei and the communist one-party systems in Laos and Vietnam.

**The origins of democracy and autocracy in Southeast Asia – looking for clues in transformation research**

Based on the distribution of types of regimes outlined above, Southeast Asia is a “natural laboratory”, according to Regina Abrami and Richard Doner, in which a variety of theories from transformation research can be tested. Although research has only taken advantage of this potential in a very limited form to date, some interesting results can be noted. The most important will be described below. These explanations are based on the general distinction of four “large theoretical line[s] in […] transformation research” by Wolfgang Merkel, which are: modernisation theory, structuralism, action theory and culturalism. These are, of course, ideal type distinctions, and are often combined in actual day-to-day research.

**The subject of controversy – modernisation theory**

Of the four lines of thought, modernisation theory offers the oldest explanatory approach. This model centres on the link between socioeconomic transition and the type of political order. In the classical variation, it explores the “social requirements for democracy” as formulated by Seymour Martin Lipset in his famous work from 1960. The central tenet of his modernisation theory holds that: “the wealthier a nation is, the greater the chances of democracy unfolding become”. Lipset uses a set of indicators to determine the level of modernisation. They measure prosperity, the levels of industrialization, education, and urbanization, and the prevalence of mass media in a society. The level of modernisation is the key variable for explaining why a viable democracy is (or is not) established in a society.

To summarize modernisation theory’s line of argumentation: increasing economic prosperity goes hand in hand with industrialization, increasing urbanization, improved educational levels and a transformation of class and social structures (in particular the expansion of the middle classes to whom Lipset assigns a bias for political moderation) in a society. According to Lipset, the secondary effects of social transformation driven by economic modernization and the moderation of distribution conflicts improve the prospects for a democracy to develop.

Modernisation theory is the subject of controversy in comparative democracy research. Its assumptions and “middle class thesis” have come up against a lot of criticism in research in Asia. Critique is based on two arguments: Firstly, it has been observed that the connection between economic prosperity and the presence of democracy is not valid for Southeast Asia. There the societies with the highest prosperity and level of modernisation are under authoritarian rule (Brunei, Singapore and Malaysia). In contrast most of the regime changes that have occurred took place in countries that do not fulfil the “social requirements of democracy” (the Philippines, Indonesia, Cambodia, and East Timor). Secondly, it has been postulated that the middle classes are often not the social driver behind democratic change. Results of research into Southeast Asia reveal an image of the middle classes’ political role that does not seem to fulfil modernisation theory’s middle class thesis. The attitude of the middle classes towards democracy and dictatorship largely depends on their institutional and social rootedness and on their relationship to the state in particular. In development processes more strongly controlled by the state, such as in Malaysia and Singapore, the growth of the middle class has been linked to the expansion of the public or semi-public sector and the development strategy supported by the
state. Correspondingly empirical studies portray an image of a social group generally quite close to the state. As long as the government "delivers", the middle classes remain loyal and conform to the system.

In contrast the expansion of the middle classes in Thailand and the Philippines originated overwhelmingly in the private sector. As a result, they were less dependent on state protection to preserve their opportunities for economic acquisition. The middle classes did, in fact, contribute considerably to the democratic mass mobilization that led to the fall of autocratic rule in the Philippines (1986) and Thailand (1992). But here too recent decades have clearly shown that members of the middle classes are undeniably prepared to act against democratically legitimate governments when they feel their interests are threatened by the awakening demands of lower social classes for participation.

This criticism is not baseless. But it also does not completely invalidate the modernisation theory. We need to differentiate between the causes of a transition to democracy and the reasons for its preservation. The first perspective is known as the "endogenous" variation of the modernisation theory and cannot explain the political reality of Southeast Asia very well. If one believes Przeworski’s results, then it also fails when taken globally. The modified “exogenous” variation of modernisation theory does not postulate a connection between prosperity and democratisation, though it does grant modernisation and prosperity an influence on the preservation of democracies. When a democracy is introduced for reasons exogenous to modernisation, prosperity develops an immunising influence on the sensitivity to crisis of democracies and increases the likelihood that they will survive. Democratic crises and authoritarian relapses are not impossible, but modernisation makes them less likely. This understanding eases the tension between the Southeast Asian “anomalies” and modernisation theory. The exogenous variation of the theory allows one to argue that the stabilising effects of prosperity and development do not take effect on the fragile processes of democratisation in the region. Conversely, the argument can be made for countries such as Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei that the modernisation theory prerequisites for stable democracies would be very good following a democratic regime change. The lack of democracy in these countries can be attributed to conditions, factors and processes that lie outside the explicatory range and claim of exogenous modernisation theory.

**Pragmatic partnerships – structuralism**

Observations on the middles classes’ attitude of ambivalence towards democracy find confirmation in structural analyses. As a metatheory, structuralism states that the configuration of social relationships forms, limits and empowers stakeholders in predicable ways. Such structural configurations generate social stakeholders on the one hand, and expand and limit their actions on the other. This also influences the chances for and stability of democracies. It is the possible result of conflict between social forces that act according to their own interests, and in so doing keep an eye on opportunities for material appropriation. In the classic formulation of Barrington Moore, the “bourgeoisie” plays decisive role: “No bourgeoisie, no democracy”. The maxim of structuralism has been well received in Southeast Asian research. Moore’s theory of the role played by the bourgeoisie in promoting democracy has been rejected however. The prominent role of the state in the capitalistic development of Southeast Asia has been the inspiration for entrepreneurs and the upper middle classes to enter into a pragmatic partnership with authoritarian regimes and develop a genuine interest in preserving the political status quo. While the power relationships between the state and social groups shift as the result of increasing industrialization, internationalization and the differentiation of national economic systems, private entrepreneurs and members of the middle class still remain democrats in a limited sense: they only support democracy when it seems to be in keeping with their economic interests. An additional factor is the fact that the body of entrepreneurs in some Southeast Asian countries is primarily comprised of the Chinese minority. In countries like the Philippines and Thailand, they have assimilated socially and culturally, are economically independent from the state and act as an autonomous political power. In Indonesia and Malaysia, however, they have not assimilated culturally and are viewed with mistrust by the population due to their ethnic background, economic power and close ties to the ruling elites. These “pariah capitalists” are particularly interested in protecting the authoritarian regime.

**Democracy as sheet anchor – tenets of elite theory**

What makes the structuralist approach so attractive for research in Southeast Asia, according to Slater, is its proximity to comparative historical analysis and related focus on the “path dependency” of in-
stitutional development and the importance of “critical junctures” and “critical antecedents”. Admittedly the pragmatic dimension of political processes may be relegated too far into the background. In contrast the focus of stakeholder-oriented approaches in transformation research is on the interests, operational rational and strategic interactions of the political elites who are conceived of as rational stakeholders seeking to maximize gain. Proponents of this line of reasoning do, however, allow that the behavior of the elite can only be perceived and understood against the background of their institutional or social rootedness.

Donald Crone, who looked into the organizational basis of political elites in the region and their interactions with social forces, and William Case, who adapted the newer elite theory approach for his exploration of autocratic and democratic rule in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines, have published important studies on democratic and autocratic rule in Southeast Asia informed by actor or elite theory. In the elite paradigm, the actions of the political elites, or lack thereof, their integration into national coalitions, the cohesion of such coalitions and their links to the wider social classes are the key variables for explaining stable authoritarian order and democratic regime change. Larger social groups are conceived of in independent social categories. They only play a role in so far as they are part of a political structure of opportunity that is instrumentally incorporated by the elite. Democracy arises when the elite agree to introduce democratic processes to preserve their own interests. Case’s insight was to link the elite paradigm with Donald Crone’s ideas about the interaction of social groups and elites. This opens elite theory’s explanatory patterns up to the interdependence of the actions of the elite and the collective action of social groups. His analysis also incorporates the restrictions and opportunities imposed on the actions of the political elite by the political attitudes and demands of citizens. The combination of these two variables, “the level of cohesion of the elite” (ideologically or consensually unified or not unified) and the level of participation on the part of society, explains the different forms of political rule in Southeast Asia. Stable interactions among the elite promote stable rule; a lack of consensus among the elite and weak elite cohesion in contrast lead to instability. Whether democracy or autocracy takes root depends to a large extent on the participative orientation and demands of social groups and on how the elite respond. While Case claims that the type of elite – more specifically: the relationships among segments of the elite – is the principal determinant of type of regime and transition, the systematization of the interaction of the causal variables and their effect on the type of regime shows that the type of elite is decisive for regime stability, while regime type (autocracy or democracy) is the result of social factors. Case employs the pressure exerted by society for the right to participate resulting from the rise of new social classes, political orientation and social associations that emerge from socioeconomic transition as a means to explain regime instability, bringing his approach closer to the maxims of modernization theory and culturalism.

**Democracy is a matter of opinion – political culture - approaches**

The common denominator of culturalist approaches is the assumption that political structure and political culture must be in agreement for political stability. This can be sub-divided into an interpretative and an empirical-social line of scientific thought. The overriding thesis of the first tradition is that the formal political institutions in (South)east Asian states are just a political system façade. Informal rules that existed in pre-colonial times and have shaped the relationship between authority and the population are at play in the background. This means that the symptoms of crisis in democratic development named above are the expression of tension between political system structures and culturally linked assumptions about what is politically legitimate and how the dominant and the dominated define political problems.

These considerations contribute to our understanding of the wider area of political symbolism and ritual. The leadership style of political elites and the multiplicity of protest rituals executed by local populations can be well understood in view of Javanese, Burmese, Malian or Chinese political traditions. This research approach conceives of culture as an instrument of dominance and as a resource used by political elites to organize and mobilize their own societies. It also offers insight into the process of legitimation of political authorities in authoritarian regimes and in regimes undergoing a process of internal democratization.

But on the theory horizon, this variation of cultural theory remains fairly far behind the contributions of the newer theories and approaches of empirical-analytical political cultural research. They depend on
the assumption of an interaction between socioeconomic modernization and cultural transition. Human capital theory is the most theoretically ambitious of these. Empirical studies of citizens’ understanding of democracy, their satisfaction with and support of democracy in Asian states, are less elegant and comprehensively well-founded, but they are equally well supported by a wide range of data and empirical findings. The general implications of such studies are clear for Southeast Asia. In their evaluation of the Asian Barometer Surveys from 2006/7, Doh Chull Shin and Youngho Cho summarize it thusly:

“An overwhelming majority of Southeast Asians embrace democracy as the most preferred regime [...] Yet many of these regime democrats remain either uninformed or misinformed about what makes a political system democratic. Moreover, unlike their peers in the West and in other regions, they do not understand democracy in liberal terms; instead, they understand democracy in terms of a-liberal or authoritarian political practices. And in formulating and implementing policies, they remain more attached to the authoritarian rather than the liberal mode of governance”.

The political-cultural prerequisites for the development and consolidation of liberal democracy in those states in which it has already been implemented are therefore not good. The chances for democracy in those countries in which it does not already exist are equally poor, for, based on their own understanding of democracy, the large majority of the population assesses the existing political order as democratic. It follows that support for a change in regime would therefore be small. Additionally this is unlikely to change any time soon.

Ultimately the human capital theory explores the influence of socioeconomic processes of modernization on changes in political views and values. It assumes change potential and links it with the likelihood of a transition to democracy and a democracy’s chances of survival. The “sequence of human development” starts with socioeconomic development, moves through the development and spread of a range of self-expression values focused on emancipation, and ultimately leads to attitudes that promote and are necessary for democracy. The spread of self-development values has a favorable effect on democracy in those countries in which it is has not yet been established and strengthens democracy where it already exists. The transition to democracy takes place where bourgeoisie culture is broad enough. But the differences in the spread of self-development values help explain the qualitative differences between democracies. Democracy is more stable where self-development values are more strongly represented. With the data provided by Inglehart and Welzel on Singapore, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand, one could argue that the reason democracy has not developed in Vietnam and its partial development in the other countries lies not in the power machinations of the political elites or the lack of a social-structural foundation, but rather in the weakness of self-development values in these societies.

**Persistent autocracies - overview**

Progress along the path to democracy has become rare in Southeast Asia in recent years. In most cases, a stagnation or even rollback of political transformation has been observed. The reasons for this are many. The brief remarks provided on the different arguments and findings leads to the conclusion that from a wide range of theoretical perspectives, the states of Southeast Asia are predominantly “unlikely candidates” for successful democratization. Of course, such an assessment has its limitations, as it largely ignores agential factors that are also crucial for democratic survival, the deepening of democracy, and improvements in democratic governance. Nevertheless, we need to acknowledge that with regard to the medium- to long-term prospects for democratic endurance and consolidation, much less the prospects for further democratization processes and improved democratic governance, there seem to be few grounds for optimism. In view of the tenaciousness of the “defects” of the young democracies of Southeast Asia identified in various reports and studies on democratic transformation in the region (see for example the Bertelsmann Foundation’s recently released BTI 2012), the great tenacity of hard autocracies like Myanmar and Laos, and the regime stability, based on output legitimacy and the ability to adapt, of “soft” autocracies such as Singapore and Malaysia hardly speaks for the improved implementation of the democratic constitutional state in the region. This requires a response beyond political science. Development cooperation must also adjust. The latter is important in view of the fact that not just the differences in the functionality of liberal democratic institutions impact the material political performance of political regimes, their responsiveness to the interests of and de-
mands from society, and their ability to manage crises. The particular characteristic idiosyncrasies of different varieties of autocracies are also of particular import. In this context, the immense differences in the socioeconomic performance, political stability and quality of governance demonstrate that neither the maxim that democracy is fundamentally the highest performer and “best” of all forms of government, nor the thesis that authoritarian governance models are superior, can be empirically proven. This picks up on a pointed statement by Dani Rodrik, a political scientist who teaches at Harvard: “(f)or every authoritarian country that has managed to grow rapidly, there are several that have floundered. For every Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, there are many like Mobutu Sese Seko of the Congo” (Rodrik 2010: 1). One could argue that the Southeast Asian “Mobutus” do not only reside in Naypidaw or Phnom Penh. Even the office holders legitimized by democratic elections in Manila or Dili are not exactly shining examples of governance that focuses on the common good and the sustainable provision of public goods. This results in a problem that might actually hit democracies harder than autocracies, for in democracies, the ability to replace a lack of legitimacy and loyalty with repression is limited by definition.
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