

NASEAS

The Nordic Association for Southeast Asian Studies (NASEAS) was formed in 1983 and has at present more than 150 Nordic researchers as active members. Scholars outside the Nordic region can obtain associate membership. The aim of NASEAS is to promote Nordic social science research on Southeast Asia and related problems in South and East Asia, to extend and strengthen contacts between researchers and students, and to support the dissemination of research results.

NASEAS' activities are organized around annual conferences rotating between the Nordic countries. The governing body of NASEAS is the annual meeting which elects a board in charge of the daily running of the Association.

NONESA was launched in 1989 as forum to promote Nordic collaboration and give information on major scholarly events. It is published twice a year. NONESA relies on information communicated to the editors and material collected by the representatives of the major Nordic research milieus. It is distributed to members of NASEAS, and to major research centres around the world.

In 1994 a Bulletin of NASEAS was introduced as a complement to NONESA. The Bulletin is available as e-mail and provides information of short-term character about seminars, workshops, et cetera.

NONESA

Newsletter of
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NASEAS

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Contents

Editor's page

Political Culture in Southeast Asia

Call for papers for NASEAS conference

Please be Precise when Researching Democracy!

by Stein Tønnesson

Report from the Aalborg conference

Deteriorating situation for SEAsian studies in Denmark

by Irene Nørlund

Lund Centre for East- and Southeast Asian Studies

by Christer Gunnarsson

Housing in Historic City Centres of Southeast Asia

by Michael Toyka-Seid

Brief announcements:

ConsumAsian

Workshop: Democracy in Asia?

Workshop: Nordic Orientalism

Revue Peninsula

Please be Precise when Researching Democracy!

by Prof. Stein Tønnesson

Democracy is coming up again as a hot topic for research on Southeast Asia. Several new projects are under consideration by the funding agencies, and conferences on democracy are organized in many places. The topic is bound to be discussed at the forthcoming NASEAS conference on political culture.

We can avoid much unnecessary future confusion if we agree at the outset to be precise about how we define 'democracy'. I don't mean to suggest that we should all agree on one definition, but I would like to suggest as a requirement for the funding of research projects that they are precise about their definition, or, alternatively, about their reason for not defining the term.

Basically I see three acceptable scholarly approaches:

1) The first uses a 'procedural' or 'institutional' definition, focusing on respect for basic freedoms, the freedom and fairness of elections, and the relationship between elected and appointed institutions of government. The main test to be passed for a viable institutional democracy is a peaceful transition of political power from one group to another whereafter the members of the resigning government can continue to operate freely on the political arena. This scholarly approach is 'top down' since it focuses on the decision-makers themselves rather than the people at large, who mainly play the role of electorate. A researcher using this first approach can choose to focus on formal rules (constitutions) or on actual political practice. Research can be made on the local, regional or national level. The researcher should be aware of the fact that her approach is not culturally insensitive since it builds on a definition of democracy developed in the Western liberal tradition. A research project using this approach on

Southeast Asia should probably discuss to what extent institutional democracy is compatible with Southeast Asian cultural patterns, or discuss the ways in which institutional democracy has been, can be, or cannot be, modified to become culturally compatible. It is this first approach which has been used in the reports produced for SIDA by NIAS about *Democracy in Vietnam?* (NIAS-Report no. 16, 1993) and *The Quest for Balance in a Changing Laos* (no. 25, 1995). These reports build on the assumption and the hope that institutional democracy can become compatible with Vietnamese and Laotian political culture. The advantage of the first approach is that it is scholarly manageable. The institutional definition makes it fairly easy to assess to what extent a given state is democratic or not. The disadvantage of the approach is that it focuses mainly on political elite groups.

2) The second scholarly approach applies a 'substantial' definition, focusing on actual popular participation in political decision-making. This is a 'bottom-up' approach which looks for 'real' popular influence. It looks beyond formal structures and analyzes how people actually exert (or do not exert) influence on political decisions. Projects using this approach will need to analyze the way people organize (or do not organize), and to map the kinds of channels that exist (or do not exist) between local communities/grassroot organizations and decision-makers on various political levels. Like the first approach this is one that can be applied on any part of the world, and it may well be that a researcher using this approach can find more substantial democracy in a country which does not have an institutionally democratic state than in a country with a state that organizes free elections, guarantees a free press, etc. A researcher using this approach should probably also be sensitive to cultural factors inducing or inhibiting popular participation in decision-making. This approach overcomes the main deficiency of the first approach by focusing on the people at large, but it is far less scholarly manageable since it is difficult to establish good criteria for

assessing the degree of popular participation in decision-making.

3) The third scholarly approach is discourse analysis and does not require a definition of democracy at all. Indeed a scholar using this approach should avoid to have a definition of her own, even at the back of her mind. The approach consists in analyzing Southeast Asian concepts of democracy, how various Southeast Asian movements, governments, leaders and thinkers have defined and conceived of the term and on how they have used it as a catchword. To linguistically assess the connotations of the various translations of the term will be essential. An open minded scholar using this approach will probably find that 'democracy' has been a convenient catchword for many groups opposing the existing government, but with little intention of creating either institutional or substantial democracy. She will also be able to analyze how it has been used by governments to legitimize their holding on to power. The most interesting, perhaps, will be to see how the concept has been inserted in various already existing political and religious discourses. The advantage of this third approach is that it can bring the scholar into Southeast Asian political cultures without a pre-established universalist (or Western) scale of judgment.

I do not want to say that any of these three approaches is of greater scholarly value than the others. What I want to say is that a scholar undertaking a study of democracy in Southeast Asia should make clear which of the three approaches she intends to apply, and a researcher using more than one of the three approaches should distinguish clearly between them. This, in my view, applies to all social science disciplines.

EMERGING CLASSES AND GROWING INEQUALITIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Report from the 11th Annual Conference of NASEAS
Gl. Vraa Slot, Aalborg, Denmark, 23-25 September 1994.

The aim of the conference was to explore different approaches, methods and typologies related to the study of emerging classes and growing inequalities in Southeast Asia. The conference was organised in plenary sessions with key note speakers and 3 workshop sessions.

The conference was opened by Professor *Jacques Hersh* (Dept. of Development and Planning, Aalborg University), who gave a paper on the role of the US as a factor in the rise of East and Southeast Asia. Hersh stressed the importance of geo-political factors, particularly the military and economic interests of the US, in the post-WW II creation of class structures in the region. The two invited key-note speakers Professor *Joel Kahn* (School of Sociology and Anthropology, La Trope University, Australia) and Professor *Richard Robison* (director, Asia Research Centre, Murdoch University, Australia) addressed the emergence of "new" social strata in the rapidly growing economies. Robison's paper gave a general introduction to common trends and particularities among the middle class in the region, stressing their political importance. Kahn gave a paper on the new class contradictions between the urban and the rural contexts in Southeast Asia, in which he emphasized the importance of culture and state-promoted ideological national "projects". He based his argument on analyses of Malaysia's development process.