

Presidentialism and Democracy in East and Southeast Asia, ed. Marco Bünte, Mark R. Thompson, Routledge 2023, pp. 1731

The actual history of the constitutional democracies of the independent states of East and Southeast Asia begins during the Cold War, when this region also became an area of conflict between two warring blocs. Decolonization and democratization in this region began after the end of World War II and lasted practically to the first decade of the 21st century, although according to many, these processes cannot be considered completed yet. At that time, guided by historical experience, the religion professed by the majority of society, and economic ties with former colonizers or neighbouring countries, choices were made as to the political system adopted, the system of government, and the main principles of the state's functioning.

At present, it is very difficult to find a common denominator for legal and comparative research on the constitutional systems of the countries of the region discussed. It should be taken into account that when choosing a democratic system and a system of government, political elites are guided by certain factors. Research on this subject shows that two elements are particularly important: institutional experiences

and the cultural geography of a given country. Earlier democratic experiences, especially when they led to the introduction of authoritarian governments, are constraints for the authors of the constitution, who, wanting to avoid the mistakes of their predecessors, eliminate previously adopted political solutions from their field of interest. At the same time, states that have experienced a military dictatorship are more likely to introduce a presidential system. The second factor determining the choice of the system of government is cultural geography and colonial experience. Most Latin American countries have adopted a presidential system, while Western European countries have a parliamentary system. In these regions, only a few countries have decided to introduce a semi-presidential system, although it is widespread in Eastern Europe. The influence of former colonizers is not without significance. Former British colonies strongly favour parliamentarism, while most former French colonies in Africa adopted a semi-presidential system, and all the former Spanish colonies in South America introduced a presidential system. Of course, the time of introducing changes is not without significance for the choice of political system. During the so-called second wave of democratization, a parliamentary system was clearly preferred (it was introduced by 37 out of 55 countries

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undergoing political transformation in the years 1945–1973, that is 67.3%). In turn, the so-called the third wave of democratization favoured a presidential system (in 1974–2006, 43 out of 92 countries introduced this system of government, that is 46.7%).¹

In the light of the above, the analysis of institutional solutions adopted in the constitutions of the countries of the region under discussion allows us to distinguish two prevailing types of government systems characteristic for this area, namely the parliamentary and presidential systems. The first of them is present in Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and formally in Vietnam, as well as in Cambodia and Laos (whose basic law was modelled, among others, on the Vietnamese model). Indonesia, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste have adopted a presidential system of government. In the years 1945–2006 (i.e. in the period covering the so-called second and third waves of democratization), in the group of 26 Asian countries undergoing democratic transformation, 17 introduced a parliamentary system and 5 a presidential system (the remaining 4 countries adopted a mixed model).² The adoption of a presidential system in the Southeast Asian region can therefore be seen as an exception.

The presidential system has been long criticized, especially by political

scientists (Juan Linz³). This system is characterized by a rigorous division (separation) of the legislative and executive powers and a combination of the functions of the president and the head of government. Pursuant to these principles, the president (as an organ of executive power) has full executive power and is exempt from accountability before parliament. Critics argue that this is a system that leads to instability in power. Sharing the position put forward by Linz, they suggest that because the president and the legislature are elected separately, the legitimacy of their power is competitive, which causes conflicts. At the same time, a lack of mechanisms of dispute resolution between the president and the legislature leads to the politicization of the judicial system and the involvement of the justice system in conflict resolution. However recent research conducted in this regard on the governments of Southeast Asian countries that have adopted the presidential system of government seems to contradict this thesis.

As a consequence, the presidential system of government has its supporters and opponents, strengths and weaknesses. Nevertheless, its characteristics do not in themselves prevent the construction of a lasting presidential democracy. How the presidential system of government will function in practice depends not only on the formal

¹ Jung Jai Kwan, Ch.J. Deering, “Constitutional choices: Uncertainty and institutional design in democratising nations,” *International Political Science Review* 2015, 36, pp. 60–77.

² *Ibidem*, p. 9.

³ J. Linz, “Presidential or Parliamentary Democracy: Does It Make a Difference,” in: *The Failure of Presidential Democracy*, eds. J. Linz, A. Valenzuela, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1994, p. 3.

institutional framework adopted, but also on such variable and non-obvious factors as the personality of political actors, the party system, and general cultural issues.

The book reviewed here is included in the “Routledge/City University of Hong Kong Southeast Asia Series” that has been published since 2004. *Presidentialism and Democracy in East and Southeast Asia* examines the impact of presidential systems on democracies by examining three distinct topics: the perilousness of competing legitimacies of the executive and legislative branches; issues of institutional design (particularly regarding semi-presidentialism); and the rise of executive aggrandizement. Despite often intense political conflict and temporary instability in East and Southeast Asia, presidential systems of various types – from relatively “pure” forms to semi-presidentialism and other hybrids – have largely been resilient. Although there are signs of growing authoritarianism in several cases, presidentialism, associated with both accommodation and conflict, has usually not driven this. This book’s contributions to presidentialism debates – as the authors claim – will be of interest to students and scholars of comparative politics, while the book also offers detailed analysis of the presidency in these East and Southeast Asian cases.

The book examines presidential systems operating in South Korea, the Philippines, and Indonesia (pure cases of presidentialism), and in Taiwan, Timor-Leste (semi-presidentialism), and Myanmar (a hybrid system). The aim of

the authors is to fill a gap in existing literature on comparing presidentialism, which until lately continued to exclude most East and Southeast Asian cases.

Bearing in mind the above, Erik Mo-brand argues that formal institutions in South Korea do not account for either stability or instability of presidentialism.

As regards the Philippines (the oldest and the purest form of presidentialism in the region), Mark R. Thompson provides strong evidence for the danger of that system, both in terms of the competing legitimacy claims of the executive and the legislature, and also in connection with aggrandisement.

In the chapter on Indonesia, Dirk Tomsa argues that presidential politics there is, above all, a reflection on a complex regime configuration in which a president navigates between popular demands from the electorate, the interests of powerful veto actors who use democratic procedure only as an instrument to defend their predominantly material interests, and a constantly evolving but still inefficient set of political institutions that have largely failed to ensure accountability and transparency. On the other hand, Andres Ufen highlights the effect of presidentialism on the structure of political parties in Indonesia.

The chapter on Taiwan focusses on its evolution after 1949. Taiwan’s semi-presidential form of government consists of a parliamentary system with a president mandated to fulfil the role of political adjudicator between the legislative and executive branches of government. As in South Korea, civil

society in Taiwan has been crucial for successfully overcoming authoritarian legacies in order to build democratic accountability in a presidential system.

In an analysis of Timor-Leste, Rui Graça Feijo explains that the election of non-partisan presidents has contributed to stabilizing the country's young democracy. After 2017, this informal tradition was abandoned, and it is unclear how this will influence the political system.

It is argued by Marco Bunte that Myanmar's 2008 constitution created a special form of hybrid presidentialism, which not only conditioned the transition from military to civilian rule but also provided the background for later military dissatisfaction, ultimately leading to the military coup of February 2021.

Consequently, the authors conclude that presidentialism has often been quite resilient in East and Southeast Asia, largely defying claims of its political perilousness based on research from other regions, particularly Latin America.

The publication reviewed here is undoubtedly a significant voice in the discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of the presidential system of

government. It clearly proves that not only the provisions of the constitution, but, above all, other factors determine the functionality of the adopted model of government. On the basis of the findings made by the authors of this publication, it can be concluded that a discussion on how to ensure the efficient and, at the same time, law-abiding functioning of a presidential system of government has become desirable, rather than considering – in the event of problems – a drastic change of the regime to a parliamentary or semi-presidential one. Taking into account that the same system can function in different ways (e.g. when governments are held by different presidents), reforms of the political system, especially radical reforms, should be approached with caution. At the same time, a thorough analysis should be made not only of the provisions of the constitution, but also of the president's informal practices and leadership style, assessing how the system will function in various configurations of such extra-legal factors.

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