

Mizuno, Kosuke and Pasuk Phongpaichit, eds. *Populism in Asia*. Singapore: NUS Press and Kyoto University Press, 2009, 228p.

According to the editors of this collection of essays, this is probably the first book in English with the words "Asian" and "Populism" together in its title. The volume begins with a compact and well written introduction by the editors followed by an engaging article by Matsushita Hiroshi on the evolution of populism in Latin America called the "treasure house" of populisms. Matsushita's article demonstrates not only the resemblances between Asian and Latin American "populisms" but also their inevitable divergences. Recent Asian "populisms" seem to reflect a closer affinity with Fujimori's "neoliberal populism" than with the subsequent wave of socialist and leftist populisms currently sweeping Latin America exemplified by Hugo Chavez's rise to power. The general consensus in the book is that the processes of economic globalisation and political democratization leading up to the Asian economic crisis of 1997 led to an erosion of legitimacy among the traditional elites which in turn opened the way for various types of populism to surface.

The book presents the rise and fall of Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra as the paradigmatic case of "Asian populism." An article co-written by Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker grounds their narrative of Thaksin's rise and fall on their analysis of the social and class basis of contemporary Thai populism. They convincingly argue that Thaksin's appeal lay mainly among the great numbers of people work-

ing in the agricultural and urban informal sector. This essay together with Tamada Yoshifumi's study on the irreversible changes wrought by political democratisation and globalisation on Thai society probably represents the core of the book as a whole. Continuing the series of studies on Thaksin, Nualnai Treerat gives a very compelling survey of Thaksin's use of the media and how his attempts at gradually increasing his monopolistic control over these eventually contributed in a crucial way to his downfall.

The other Asian leader sharing the most similarities to Thaksin is probably Joseph Estrada of the Philippines. Both Estrada and Thaksin are relative outsiders to the traditional ruling oligarchies of their respective nations. Estrada used his popularity as a movie actor as political capital while Thaksin developed an increasingly sophisticated and creative use of media as a propaganda tool. However, there are also very significant differences between the two. Upon gaining office, Thaksin began to implement programs aimed at consolidating his popularity among his rural base. Thaksin was able to meet certain expectations among the rural poor with his unprecedented programs for universal health care, agrarian debt relief and accessible loans. By appropriating for himself certain roles which overlapped with the functions and prerogatives of the monarchy, Thaksin was increasingly felt to be a threat to the latter's fundamental role in Thai politics. In contrast to Thaksin's relatively effective albeit limited programs, Estrada's pro-poor image was a complete myth. Too eager to win the support of the US and to gain the confidence of the business community, Estrada quickly delegated all policy matters to his advisers and technocratic staff and went passively along with the neoliberal agenda without exhibiting any exertion of creativity or the slightest independence of mind on all major policy issues.

However, authors Tamada and Rocamora would probably agree that both leaders did not pose any serious structural challenge to the “established elites” of their respective nations. They instead represent a type of “democratisation” which made these traditional elites uneasy, perhaps only until they too are able to master, control and limit the new techniques for winning electoral power. Like Thaksin, Estrada lacked the solid mass organisations of classical populism and depended on the media for projecting himself as a personal leader among the people. Lacking a social base ready to be mobilised to defend them when threatened, they were thus rendered extremely vulnerable when their leadership faced powerful challenges. Estrada’s downfall was probably not because any of the existing oligarchs felt that their position in Philippine society was being seriously threatened by him in the immediate or even in the long-term, but simply because Estrada had left himself vulnerable to attacks from the other factions of the ruling elites scrambling for power. Everyone knows that there is nothing new about rampant corruption in the Philippines. What is new is how Estrada flaunted his wealth and legendary extravagances. Using the banner of “clean government,” other factions of the oligarchy could mobilize their own middle class constituencies, branches of government, Church people and the military against Estrada to regain power for themselves. Politics is a cut throat affair in the Philippines. However, the most recent election (2010) in which Estrada came second in the presidential race shows that for a large segment of Philippine voters, the image of their hero has faded but little.

Rocamora’s main proposition that “populists succeed when they are able to bridge the discursive gulf between the westernized elite and poor people” may be more specific to the Philippines than he realizes. This former US colony is after

all the country where class divisions are much more visible linguistically and culturally than perhaps any other country in Southeast Asia. Such an almost seamless transformation accomplished by Thaksin from being a savvy billionaire businessman quoting Bill Gates to a “man of the people” embraced by thousands in Thailand is much harder to conceive of in the Philippine context. Benedict Anderson’s afterword rightly stresses the culturally specific nature of populist practices.

Boo Teik Khoo’s article compares Mahathir and Thaksin by sketching a broader political economic and ideological context points to a longer tradition of populism in Asia. However valuable this may be in giving a longer view of the populist phenomenon in Southeast Asia, it seems to dilute the sharpness of vision necessary to understand the “novelty” of Thaksin and Estrada. Deft and durable statesman that he is, Mahathir seems to ultimately belong to another political era which bear the stamp of “populisms” of the type of leaders like Marcos and Suharto. Okamoto’s article rightly makes the observation that the term “populism” does not apply to national leaders such as Megawati or SBY and therefore shifts the discussion to a brilliant account of the rise of local “populist” leaders such as Fadel Mohammed from the province of Gorontalo in Sulawesi. Okamoto’s article points to the importance of a local perspective in studying the development of this new type of populism.

The remaining articles on South Korea, Taiwan and Japan are relatively more disparate and diffuse but they all point to the decline of party legitimacy and the rise of individual leaders. Kimura Kan writes about South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun’s “obsolete [leftist] nationalism” failing in the face of a resurgent “developmentalism.” Taiwan President’s Chen Shui-Bian’s tenure in power was discussed by Matsumoto Mitsutoyo under the rubric of “nationalist popu-

lism" which also collapsed mainly due to US pressure to maintain the status quo in the Taiwan straits. Otake Hideo makes a careful and instructive comparison of the neoliberal populisms of Reagan and Koizumi.

The sharpness of focus and definition which Thaksin's example of a new type of Asian neoliberal populism provides the book is not very evenly maintained throughout the book. The book itself, despite the attempts of the various articles to analytically capture the slippery concept of populism, mirrors the very difficulty of coming to grips with it. Nevertheless, the book provides useful conceptual tools in understanding and confronting contemporary political phenomena in Asia, more specifically, Southeast Asia. It is truly an academic event which heralds an innovative way of looking at political events in Asia.

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