

# Technocracy and Politics in a Trajectory of Conflict\*

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Technocracy often holds out the promise of rational, professional, and politically disinterested decision-making particularly in economic planning and management. Yet states and regimes frequently turn to technocracy not just to obtain expert inputs and calculated outcomes but to embed the exercise of power in many agendas, policies, and programs. Thus, technocracy operates as an appendage of politically constructed structures and configurations of power, and highly placed technocrats cannot be mere backroom experts who supply disinterested rational-technical solutions in economic planning, resource allocation, and social distribution since they are engaged in inherently political exercises. Using examples of technocratic interventions in a variety of developing countries, this article traces the trajectories of technocracy that were marked by conflict, especially in conditions of rapid social transformation, severe economic restructuring, or political crises when the technocratic was unavoidably political.

**Keywords:** technocracy, economic crises, structural adjustment, politics in Chile, Indonesia, the Philippines, neoliberalism, populism

I am not a politician. . . . I am a technocrat and believe in technocracy,  
and technicians are politically neutral.  
(Raúl Prebisch cited in Dosman 2008)

With social thought turning so rapidly into attempted social engineering,  
a high incidence of failed experiments is the price that is often paid for  
the influence intellectuals wield.  
(Hirschman 1979, 86–87)

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Technocracy, signifying the use of technocrats in economic decision-making (rather than the more precise but rarely encountered *rule by* technocrats), has had a curiously troubled relationship with politics. At first glance that seems unlikely. On the one hand, politics, in the shape of states and regimes, needs technocracy for complex policy formulation that is fortified and legitimized by expert knowledge, methodical applications, and reasoned expectations. Technocracy, on the other hand, needs politics, that is, the sanction of power, to insulate it from pressure and interference that would prevent technocrats from being deployed or heeded “without fear or favor” as the old cliché goes.

In reality their apparently symbiotic relationship contains a latent conflict. The conflict is readily seen in certain forms. Sometimes seemingly technical recommendations may be rejected and the technocrats associated with them ejected from their positions for running afoul of the powers that in principle insulate them from interference. At other times, technocrats find themselves arraigned against vested interests that circumvent or sabotage technocratic forms of governance. Or else, popular resentment against apparently rational policies may erupt into anti-regime protests that are put down by repressive measures. Yet, the conflict lies deeper. Politics depends on technocracy for expert inputs and calculated outcomes in order to embed the exercise of state power in many kinds of agendas, policies, decisions, and programs. Thus, any functioning technocracy operates as an appendage of politically constructed structures, institutions, and configurations of power. At certain levels of work and in circumscribed situations, socio-economic problems may require no more than technical solutions. Beyond that, it is illusory to conceive of highly placed policy-making technocrats as backroom boys (and girls) whose task is to prepare disinterested rational-technical solutions to problems of economic planning, resource allocation, and social distribution, each of which is inherently a political matter.<sup>1)</sup> The potential for conflict is especially high when technocracy is inserted into policy-making and technocrats emerge as an identifiable force under critical circumstances—during periods of rapid social transformation, in conditions of severe economic restructuring, or at moments of political crises—when the technocratic is unavoidably political.

This article traces a post-World War II trajectory of tension and conflict between technocracy and politics, mostly in what used to be called the “underdeveloped” world. Within that trajectory the relationship between technocracy and politics had several

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1) “Clearly, some expertise is necessary to operate a statistical office or build a bridge. It is not so obvious, however, that one need be familiar with econometrics to be able to discuss economic policy or be an engineer in order to judge the merits of a new airport site” (Centeno 1993, 318). One need not agree wholly with the examples to see the point of the argument.

dimensions. These included changes in the projects of economic transformation—from modernization and development to debt and crisis management to economic stabilization and structural adjustment, and the neoliberal reconfiguration of the global economy—for which technocracy was co-opted. As such, technocrats themselves assumed different roles, being planners, implementers, managers, brokers, and intermediaries. The conditions of technocratic deployment and the hopes of their outcomes changed, too: visions of postcolonial development collapsed under structural adjustment while state intervention was reduced to neoliberal good governance. At the beginning of the trajectory was an issue that preoccupied regimes and technocrats: how should technocratic decision- and policy-making be insulated from vested interests or popular pressure? At its end has arisen “technocratization” or fusion of technocracy and politics as a way to overcome the conflicts that made each of them the bane of the other. The article contends that the narrowing potential for relatively autonomous development and a resurgence of populist forms of dissent in the former Third World suggest that just as politics can no longer depend on technocratic solutions, technocracy is far from resolving its political problems.

### **Crises of Modernization and Development**

Under the influence of “applied modernization theory,” technocracy held considerable appeal for most postcolonial governments that (even or especially when they were moved by nationalist impulses) were searching for ways to leave behind their “techno-economic backwardness” that produced an “unholy trinity of ignorance, poverty and disease” (Mkandawire 2005, 13). While theoretical debates raged among the political and intellectual circles over which developmental paths were economically ideal, politically feasible, or socially desirable, postcolonial regimes often reserved, or were advised to reserve, a special role in socio-economic planning for technocrats. These were “one sub-group of bureaucrats that possesses specialized knowledge” (Centeno 1993, 310) whose training, expertise, and professionalism were thought to have equipped them with the modern values, rational attitudes, and technical methods needed to modernize their traditional societies. For example, an international consultancy report on improving “development administration,”<sup>2)</sup> a forerunner of technocracy, reasoned that:

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2) The functions of “modern development administration” included “innovation, experimentation, active intervention in the economy, major involvement with clients, building new capacities, and conflict-management activities” but these functions “cannot be accommodated within the norms of classical Western models of administration” (Esman 1974, 16).

Modern government depends increasingly upon modern technology for national security, for the conduct of its own developmental and recurrent operations, and for the performance of its regulatory and control functions. The proficiency and knowledge of its professional and sub-professional classes therefore define the ultimate limits of its technical capabilities. . . . Because of the rapid obsolescence of professional and technical knowledge in certain fields, in fact, it may be necessary to devote disproportionate emphasis to those services where the rate of change is greatest. (Montgomery and Esman 1966, 14)

Indeed, even after modernization theory *qua* theory had been discarded, a development paradigm it spawned continued to pose issues of development as technical matters to be planned and managed in top-down fashion by professional personnel. To that extent, even when an “unsuccessful top-down approach, which had dominated the development industry until about 1990” was modified with ideas of decentralization and good governance, its technocratic discourse, focused on technical and instrumental solutions, only “directed the technocratic IDAs [International Development Agencies] back to where they started—in the structural crisis of development” (Bryld 2000, 700, 704).<sup>3)</sup>

It was not just hopes of development that made technocracy appealing. In some situations, the failure of development brought an urgent and purposeful deployment of technocrats when “the permanence, the technical skills, and the anonymity of [technocrats] ma[d]e them appear the possible receivers for otherwise bankrupt regimes.”<sup>4)</sup> The insertion of technocracy into economic policy-making and management in this manner occurred most dramatically in “post-crisis economies.”<sup>5)</sup> Some of those were underdeveloped economies, others post-Soviet Union nations undertaking a transition to capitalism. Those countries greatly differed socially, economically, and politically. In common, however, their regimes acquired a partially technocratic character by deploying technocrats in high-level economic policy-making as a response to crisis. At moments of systemic crisis, rule by experts equipped with “technocracy’s apparent emphasis on order, rationality and apolitical criteria” could be alluring (Centeno 1993, 324). During the Cold War period, and following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the turn to technocracy joined social experiments in modernization or transformation to political attempts at crisis management. Thereby, rulers and technocrats hoped that capitalist rationaliza-

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3) Bryld (2000, 702–703) made an important distinction between political and technical interpretations of concepts such as decentralization and governance when he argued that the IDAs “engage in a technical decentralization process . . . to achieve good governance and thus promote development,” using a “technical instrument . . . to reach what is necessarily a political goal.”

4) Peters (1979, 342); here, “technocrats” has been substituted for “bureaucrats” in the original text.

5) Technocrats, of course, had a different, extremely successful record elsewhere, in Japan and the newly-industrializing economies of East Asia a discussion of which is given in a later section of this article.

tion undertaken by mostly authoritarian regimes would be the answer to the failures of development that spawned radical popular mobilization.

The two reasons for the emergence of technocracy, discussed above, converged in a lasting politics of technocratic policy-making although the fads and phraseology of dominant economic doctrine changed with time and situation. Certainly technocracy and the rise of technocrats as an identifiable force in the respective economies and political systems of those countries could not have been apolitical. They were seen in such extraordinarily politicized situations as Thailand after Sarit's imposition of martial law in 1958, Indonesia in the wake of Soeharto's 1965 *gestapu*, Chile following Pinochet's overthrow of Allende in 1973,<sup>6)</sup> Ghana subsequent to military takeover in 1981, and any of a number of Eastern European or Baltic states that broke from Soviet domination after 1989. It seemed that a technical development model could be applied to less-than-modern societies and a "coherent, practical and authoritarian ideology or model of modernization" could be recommended to societies and political systems in crisis:

The technocratic model of modernization, as a highly functional strategy of government, borne into an appropriate crisis by a mission-minded team of technocrats and imposed by the military and supported by its beneficiaries, may recommend itself to like-minded and organized elites confronting similar crises. (MacDougall 1976, 1168)<sup>7)</sup>

Under Soeharto's New Order which inspired this "technocratic model,"

economists-technocrats, as non-party, professionally-trained experts, have replaced politicians in policy making posts, most visibly as a team of academics that moved into government posts laterally, from the University of Indonesia. . . . In a bureaucratic state, these technocrats have functioned as policy innovators, as courtiers of foreign investment, and as relatively systematic administrators. They have provided a repressive military regime with a progressive civilian image and initiated their military patrons into the mysteries of their science. (*ibid.*, 1166)<sup>8)</sup>

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6) For Chile which has had a longer technocratic tradition than the other countries listed here, Silva (1994, 282) has suggested that technocracy emerged in a post-World War I crisis of oligarchic order which "created a very propitious climate for the adoption of so-called 'technical and apolitical' policies" and allowed a public technocracy to act as a "moderating mediator" between competing sociopolitical forces.

7) MacDougall's is the most insistently approving of three articles in the same issue of *Asian Survey* (Vol. 16, No. 12, 1976) to assess, essentially to praise, "the contributions of technocrats to development" in Southeast Asia.

8) So arcane were the "mysteries of their science" that MacDougall was lost for a proper name for the "scientists" on whom he conferred a litany of titles; to wit, "economists-technocrats," "professionally trained experts," "professor-economists," "practical modernizers," "economic modernizers," "economists," "production-minded bureaucra[ts]," "New Order modernizers," and "primarily Western-educated economists" (MacDougall 1976, 1166, 1172, 1176, 1181).

The model presupposed the benign intent of any “like-minded elite” and the progressive stances of its “mission-minded team of technocrats.” Even so, those who opted for technocracy had to insulate the technocrats drafted for high-level policy-making. Well might the leading technocrats—the “Berkeley Mafia,” the “Chicago Boys,” and Marcos’s “pillar,”<sup>9)</sup> to take three notable examples—have been cast as “providing a repressive military regime with a progressive civilian image.” But they could hardly live down their collective reputations as the expert collaborators of military dictatorships, the designers and implementers of harshly imposed programs of economic restructuring, reductions in social spending, and deflationary policies.<sup>10)</sup> In Chile, some programs to combat extreme poverty were undertaken to give a populist tint to neoliberal economic restructuring (Huneus 2000, 498). Of Marcos’s technocratic pillar, the World Bank’s *Ascher Memorandum* candidly observed in 1980 that:

There is no evidence that the economic expansion of the first five years of martial law has created a favorable image of the technocrats that could offset the blame they have incurred for the sluggish growth, higher inflation, and unemployment of the last few years.<sup>11)</sup>

Again a frank précis of a similar situation of technocrats operating in an environment of “low politics” created by an authoritarian regime was made by another World Bank report, this time on Ghana after more than one military coup:

The military character of the Government made it possible to implement unpopular measures while depressing [*sic*] dissent. Policy issues have not been openly debated, and freedom of information and publishing rights are restricted. However, Ghana’s military leaders have given considerable decision making latitude on economic matters to the highly qualified technical team which was charged with managing the economic reform. (Nooter and Stacy 1990, cited in Moore 1995, 21)<sup>12)</sup>

Likewise, Thailand’s administration of a World Bank structural adjustment loan following an economic crisis in the early 1980s was successful, it has been argued, because Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda placed “specialist economic technocrats” in

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9) Bello, O’Connor and Broad (1982, 185) characterized Filipino technocrats as forming one of the “three pillars” of the Marcos dictatorship, the other two being the army and the “cronies.”

10) As MacIntyre and Jayasuriya (1992, 3–4) put it succinctly, “Economic adjustment (particularly in inclement global conditions) is a politically painful process, for in addition to creating glittering new benefits for some it also creates heavy costs for others. As much as an economic process, structural reform is a political process creating new winners and losers. The distribution of the costs and benefits of adjustment measures is central to an understanding of economic reform.”

11) Cited in Bello, O’Connor, and Broad (1982, 193).

12) Moore (1995) added (in his endnote, p.114), “One assumes that the ‘highly qualified team’ was a World Bank team, of course.”

key positions and gave them “protection from the pressures and protests of those groups opposed to the changes” the technocrats introduced (Anek 1992, 47).<sup>13</sup> Thus, the apolitical efficacy for which the technocrats were supposedly valued and lauded could only be attained by firm demonstrations of “political will” that insulated their technocratic deliberations, directions, and decisions from public debate, “immunized” political opposition to their programs, and repressed popular resentments (Bello, O’Connor, and Broad 1982; Silva 1991).

Moreover, the top technocrats, not having their own political base, owed their privileged positions to the patronage of regime leaders<sup>14</sup> who typically drafted them from other than the normal ranks of the state’s administrative machinery to serve in select agencies. Parachuted from relative obscurity into policy-making prominence, those technocrats could only operate against certain powerful vested interests, where necessary, if they were insulated from the obstructive actions of the latter. In the Philippines, the technocrats responsible for economic reform were often in conflict with the Marcos cronies, with the former enjoying the additional approval of the World Bank, but with the latter being regarded by the dictatorship as its more reliable “pillar” (Bello, O’Connor, and Broad 1982, 190–193). Technocracy in Latin America, too, was dependent on, rather than antithetical to, patrimonial and *caudillo* authority although “the latter rests on presumed personal qualities rather than the possession of specialized knowledge” (Teichman 2004, 25).

The converse was true, too: those who failed to persuade the patron or fall in with his intentions, or opposed his plans would not last in their positions. If one were to be cynical, the relatively cheap dispensability of technocrats was one of technocracy’s attractions to regimes and leaders from whom, alas, there could be no insulation. As Shiraishi in this volume shows, the Indonesian technocrats, “cohesive in their adherence to the three principles of balanced budget, open capital account, and pegged exchange rate system,” were effective for three decades when they functioned as Soeharto’s “right arm in formulating and executing national development policies.” However, when in response to the financial crisis of 1997–98 the technocrats urged Soeharto to call in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and introduce reform measures, their move backfired because they had lost Soeharto’s confidence and was denied access to him. In Thailand,

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13) Anek (1992, 32) stressed “Prem’s ability to insulate economic officials from the pressures of various opposing groups by building coalitional links to countervailing groups and institutions.”

14) Prominent regime leaders, each the leader of a coup d’etat, were Sarit (in Thailand), Soeharto, Pinochet, and Marcos. MacDougall (1976, 1167) called Soeharto the “prize student” who profited from the “tutelage” of his “presidential counselors”; thus was Soeharto elevated beyond the “politicians” who were dismissed by the “counselors” as more or less “grossly incompetent,” “economically irrational,” unproductively-inclined, indecisive, and impractical (*ibid.*, 1179).



Thaksin Shinawatra dismissed the “inflexible” head of the Bank of Thailand and filled key planning and financial posts with Thaksin’s own “outsider” advisers, as Pasuk and Baker recount in this volume. Mahathir Mohamad, who sharply disapproved of their monetary and fiscal responses to the 1997 financial crisis, forced the resignations of the Governor and Deputy Governor of Bank Negara Malaysia just days before he sacked Anwar Ibrahim, Deputy Prime Minister and concurrently the Minister of Finance, on September 2, 1998 (Khoo 2003).<sup>15)</sup>

The need for insulation could arise from a different source. A technocratic view of governance assumed that “all social actors can be modeled in certain predictable ways” and since “specialization [confers] on experts wisdom, self restraint, and a sense of social justice,” technocrats “should be provided with sufficient political insulation to be able to plan, implement and monitor state programmes” (Bangura 1994, 56).<sup>16)</sup> Or, if one preferred, there was link between a “technocratic mentality” and “authoritarian, exclusionary politics, resistant to both compromise and the incorporation of contrary viewpoints” (Teichman 2004, 25).<sup>17)</sup> In any case, just how technically superior their ideas and policies were compared to contrary viewpoints could not be determined, simply because of “the disappearance from the political scene of forces whose ideological predispositions favored the radical redistribution of wealth and resources” (Hadiz 1997, 63).

Alternatively, it was unnecessary to presuppose that technocrats had to accept an “inherent desirability of authoritarian political structures” to see that their “technically rational” pursuit of economic stabilization and growth at “virtually any social or political cost” led to legitimating authoritarian rule (Kaufman 1979, 190). The technocrats were not necessarily reluctant practitioners of received economic doctrines that set or limited the directions of their policies and strategies. There was a self-deluding aspect to the basic technocratic conviction that being pragmatic was being non-ideological. On the contrary,

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15) And this, in Malaysia where technocracy was part of an established and loyal civil service! Bank Negara enjoys “a reasonable degree of operational autonomy” but is not independent; it accepts that its functions are tied to “broader goals”—economic growth, high level of employment, price stability, reasonable balance in the country’s international payments position, eradication of poverty, and restructuring society (Hamilton-Hart 2008, 53). By law, the King appoints the Governor while the Minister of Finance appoints the Deputy Governor. In practice, the Prime Minister decides.

16) One could add a “technocratic view of the state . . . as a rational actor with a narrow focus on how to improve effectiveness and efficiency. Little attention is paid to non-economic factors, and the political aspects are overlooked. Thus, the complex political, social and cultural landscape in which the state operates is grossly oversimplified” (Bryld 2000, 703).

17) Still, technocrats may not always have their way. Shiraishi (in this volume) shows how the technocrat-economists favored by Soeharto had to contend with the “engineers” whose rival vision of development was infused with economic nationalism.



In imposing the domination by an instrumental rationale and scientific method, technocracies are similar to theocratic regimes or states that have explicit, dominant political ideologies. In all these cases, legitimacy comes . . . from adherence to the dictates of a “book.” Whether that document contains the word of god, a theory of history, or the econometric functions that describe equilibria, those best able to interpret its message and implement its laws cannot take opposition or popular participation into account. (Centeno 1993, 313)

Where monetarism ruled alongside the military in “a climate of total triumphalism” to “establish the rules of neoliberalism in all spheres of society” (Silva 1991, 395):

[t]he Chicago boys presented themselves as the bearers of an absolute knowledge of modern economic science, thereby dismissing the existence of economic alternatives. All possible criticism of the economic model was rejected by portraying it as the product either of ignorance or the covert promotion of particular interests. (*ibid.*, 394)

Despite the insulation, patronage, and absence of rival paradigms, the technocratic model did not establish an unambiguously salutary record of economic development in the two situations where the model was most hailed. New Order Indonesia hardly vindicated “technocratic optimism,” as was discovered by a group of young intellectuals collected around the Bandung-based weekly, *Mahasiswa Indonesia*. They scorned Sukarno and the existing political parties. Having no mass base, they looked to the military for modernizing reforms and to the Western capitalist countries for political and financial support. Later, these

outspoken champions of a technocratic style of “development” [were] distressed to discover that “development” exacerbated rather than reduced corruption, widened the gap between rich and poor, and greatly increased Indonesia’s external dependency . . . [while] opening the country’s doors to Western culture turned out to have more disintegrative than modernizing effects on Indonesian society.<sup>18)</sup>

Nor was the lesson from Pinochet’s Chile—the need “to create highly cohesive technocratic policymaking teams with relatively high degrees of insulation from social forces” (Silva 1996, 2)—so readily worthy of replication:

Under military rule, boom and bust cycles and mounting social costs characterized Chile’s lurching efforts to reorganize the economy radically. A short, gradual programme of economic stabilization

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18) This summary of the change in sentiment among the *Mahasiswa Indonesia* intellectuals comes from a review of Francois Raillon’s book on this group which the initially “still insecure Suharto clique found [to be] useful allies, since they provided an attractive ideological rationale for a regime that had none of its own and was desperately concerned to win respectability in Western eyes” (Anderson 1986, 541).

and restructuring after the overthrow of Salvador Allende was followed by draconian, ideologically rigid neoliberal policies, uneven economic recovery, and a brief spurt of rapid economic growth fueled by financial speculation that ended in Chile's worst economic decline since the Great Depression. (*ibid.*, 1)

## Intermediation and Domination

The mode and circumstance of crisis management frequently left the technocrats castigated as agents of foreign domination and penetration. It was not so much that many influential technocrats had been trained abroad, in the University of California, Berkeley, and University of Chicago, most famously or notoriously.<sup>19</sup> Shiraishi in this volume suggests that the “Berkeley Mafia” could just as well have been called the “UI-UGM Mafia,” given their initial training and later appointments, as students and then lecturers, with Universitas Indonesia and Universitas Gadjah Mada, the two leading universities of Indonesia. For Pinochet's leading technocrats, besides, Santiago came before Chicago (Silva 1991, 390–391), and the Universidad Católica de Chile before Milton Friedman's Department of Economics (Huneus 2000, 473–477). More to the point, those technocrats were the practitioners of crash programs of economic restructuring and stabilization, pro-market reform, structural adjustment, and integration or re-integration with the global capitalist system.

Such programs, seemingly the more legitimate the more they claimed to replace failed domestic initiatives, were typically implemented with the backing, under the oversight, and at the demand of foreign creditors, the IMF, and the World Bank. In general, the regimes' hopes of capital inflows, promises of foreign aid, and expectations of economic improvement had to be weighed against external pressures to dismantle the previously nationalist, socialist, or populist policy molds of crisis economies, and to remake them in the image of western market-based systems. To restructure debt-ridden economies according to structural adjustment conditionalities, for instance, technocrats with the concurrence of their rulers had to impose deflationary policies. But, over and over again, the consequence was typical: internal sacrifices were imposed on vulnerable sections of society, but the “lender of last resort” never demanded “haircuts” of foreign creditors who had made reckless loans.

Obviously no lovers of their displaced regimes, the leading technocrats “were more than simply the principal architects of economic policy: they were the intellectual brokers

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19) For an impressive list of the foreign university affiliation of the economic team of Patricio Aylwin in Chile, see Silva (1991, 407, Table 2).

between their governments and international capital, and symbols of the government's determination to rationalize its rule in terms of economic objectives" (Kaufman 1979, 189). For example, an observer, who conferred an ancient pedigree on Thai technocracy by characterizing Siam's absolute monarchs as technocrats for having introduced modernizing reforms, wrote of the World Bank and Thai technocrats as kindred spirits in restructuring administrative, financial, and planning systems:

The World Bank's implicit development ideology coincided with the classical conservatism of the technocrats and the two groups tended to bring to bear similar viewpoints when considering monetary or fiscal policy issues. Thailand joined the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in 1949, and each major loan negotiation or mission from the Bank and the Annual Consultation with the Fund tended to strengthen the technocrats' influence in the government. (Stifel 1976, 1193)

A different view which suggested that Thai technocracy emerged after the World Bank's economic survey of Thailand 1957–58 more critically held technocracy to be an accessory to the far from technical act of mapping and launching Thailand's development paths in the aftermath of Sarit's imposition of martial law in October 1958:

[t]he resultant World Bank programme . . . acted as a catalyst that conjoined the new political regime and a new development direction for Thailand, activating a combined force of Sarit's absolutist power, American imperialist wherewithal, and the technocratic strategic planning and technical know-how in the momentous transformation of Thai economy and society. (Kasian 2004, 30)

Perhaps there was little alternative. Like the rest of Southeast Asia, Thailand was in such dire need of technocratic skills given "the post-war economic disorder, decolonization, and a new responsibility for development" that a pioneering "small group of technocrats, usually trained in Europe . . . quickly gained considerable power because of the rarity of their skills" (Pasuk and Baker in this volume). And although the "close cooperation among a small group . . . [was] later mythologized" (*ibid.*), the Thai technocratic cadre that was created from the 1960s was

engaged mostly in the technical management of the economy—infrastructure planning, and tight macro management under a fixed exchange rate regime. The main direction of policy was laid down by the military rulers under the influence of the World Bank, and adjusted in practice by business lobbies. Technocrats *administered* policy, but in this era had only a limited role in *making* policy. (Pasuk and Baker 2000, 20)<sup>20</sup>

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20) Pasuk (1992, 26) concluded that over several post-war decades, Thai technocrats (and foreign advisers) helped "forge the tools [of policy reform] and . . . wield them" but "they did not decide when, where, and how they should be brought into action."

Being the intermediaries between the national and the global, so to speak, technocrats were most valuable in symbolic, ideological, and practical terms. Through them “cooperation with international business [and] a fuller integration into the world economy” was attained (Kaufman 1979, 190). The technocrats displayed “a strictly secular willingness to adopt the prevailing tenets of international economic orthodoxy . . . a different, but no less ideologically bounded, set of intellectual parameters within which the technocrats could then ‘pragmatically’ pursue the requirements of stabilization and expansion” (*ibid.*). Thus, in the “still weak and chaotic” Indonesia after Soeharto’s seizure of power, the Widjojo Nitisastro-led team of technocrats showed that the way to obtain necessary external resources was to design policies that found favor with global capitalism: the termination of “confrontation” with Malaysia, abolition of price controls, return of nationalized enterprises to former owners, passage of a liberal foreign investment law, rationalization of banking and interest rates, and end of multiple exchange rates (Anderson 1983, 488–489). Up to the mid-1970s, the Indonesian technocrats “adhered to the type of free-market, open-door economics advocated by Western liberal economic orthodoxy in general and the IMF, the World Bank . . . and the Inter-Governmental Group on Indonesia in particular” (Robison 1986, 110). But the technocrats really derived their power from their role as “managers of the process of debt renegotiation, and as authors of policies designed to allow international capital access to Indonesia” (*ibid.*).

It was power that rose and fell with the need for international capital investment, loans, and aid (*ibid.*, 111). Often the technocrats’ policies and programs did not fail, at least not initially, and not least because “rewards” of aid and capital flows to the regime they served replaced the external investor-creditor-state hostility to the supplanted regime and even sabotage of its economy (as had happened to “anti-imperialist” Indonesia and “socialist” Chile before their respective military coups). With relative success, the technocrats gained more than ideological benediction from their close associations with international educational and financial institutions. Thus, by the early 1990s, when Latin American technocrats defined “the new [that is, neoliberal] policy paradigms,” they could count on the support and approval of a “continental network of Harvard, Chicago, and Stanford grads . . . atop businesses and ministries spreading the new market mindset” (*Business Week*, June 15, 1992, 51, cited in Centeno 1994, 24). The existence of an “international network linking IMF analysts, private investors, bank officials, and government technocrats was not the figment of the conspiratorial imagination of those who sought to understand the new wave”; “[n]ot only creditors and multilateral agencies, lecturers and seminar presenters, media pundits and intellectual authorities, but even the ex-roommates of the new elites approved the new policies” (Centeno 1994, 24).

At different points in the post-World War II development of the global economy,

therefore, technocrats found themselves managing a range of economic, fiscal, debt, and monetary crises in various countries and regions. Whatever they did, and whatever the purposes they thought they were serving, they came to be the standard bearers of the World Bank's development orthodoxy, Milton Friedman's monetarism, Jeffrey Sachs's "shock therapy," the IMF's "good governance" strictures for structural adjustment,<sup>21)</sup> and the Washington Consensus of liberalization, deregulation, and privatization.

### Rare Reproduction

Purveyors of instrumental approaches, technocrats would seem to be little more than the instruments of others. Such was not always the case. Technocracy was not necessarily pre-empted from coming into its own, minimally to display more assertive forms of conduct than those discussed above. During the early and hopeful days of decolonization, "moral incentives" moved many would-be bureaucrats and technocrats: "the self-confidence, enthusiasm, and commitment that were so evident in African bureaucracies . . . were contagious, as reflected in many African students who anxiously rushed home after graduation to participate in the exhilarating projects of nation-building" (Mkandawire 2005, 16). Offering a less skeptical view of the predispositions of technocrats, relevant to the point being made here, Turner noted that in early 1970s' Nigeria:

Individual technocrats, by virtue of their technical training, and in some cases, experience in industry, are accustomed to rational, impersonal and universal criteria for making decisions and for assessing their own accomplishments. Professional standing, and therefore job mobility, depends on getting results which in turn depends on co-operation with other technocrats. Technocrats are relatively uncorrupt, not because they possess special moral qualities, but because their function is to develop and provide local technical and executive capabilities and reduce dependence on foreign resources. (Turner 1976, 69)<sup>22)</sup>

Turner's was a balanced depiction of Nigerian technocrats: they "stood" (in relation to compradors and middlemen within the civil service, and the foreign oil interests they serviced) according to where they "sat" (within structures of state power in the early 1970s). More generally, Turner's portrayal insightfully hinted how differently placed

21) Dijkstra (1996), evaluating "foreign influence on economic policies" under the Chamorro regime in Nicaragua, stressed that the implementation of structural adjustment measures could just as much be a "consequence of ideology rather than impartial technical advice," and hence not technocratic as such.

22) For what it is worth today, it might be noted that Turner's depiction was badly misrepresented in Droucopoulos and Henley (1977).

technocrats might orient their policy-making vis-à-vis foreign interests if or when they were imbued with impulses of economic nationalism. Roughly akin to the Nigerian situation, Indonesian technocrats in the mid-1970s were engaged in a protracted conflict with “various appanage holders” (Robison 1990, 110) who controlled Pertamina, the state oil company. The technocrats were especially opposed to the “financially unsound schemes . . . regardless of established priorities and acceptable costs” launched by Ibnu Sutowo, one time head of Pertamina (Milne 1982, 407). In Malaysia, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, the Chairman of Petronas, the national oil company, brought negotiations with foreign oil companies to an impasse as he fought for much better profit-sharing and operational terms.<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, the Indonesian technocrats’ externally lauded platform of “strong state and free market,” comparative advantage and free trade was internally challenged by a group of “engineers”—a sort of “Bandung Institute of Technology Mafia”—who advocated the economic-nationalist use of industrial policy, and state nurture and protection from external competition to develop domestic industries. The rivalry between technocrats and engineers—the latter being oddly disqualified from being titled technocrats<sup>24</sup>—for the support of their common patron, Soeharto, rendered Indonesia’s development somewhat schizoid, “oscillat[ing] between the two strategies”: in good times, economic nationalism led to large-scale, capital-intensive but often wasteful and debt-laden state projects; in a bust, the regime shelved those projects, devalued the rupiah, and resorted to deregulation to integrate the economy more deeply with the global market (Shiraishi in this volume).

In post-authoritarian but pre-1997 crisis South Korea, the technocracy of the finance and economic ministries clashed with “liberal economists who dominate[d] the research institutes” over the pace of financial liberalization.<sup>25</sup> The liberal economists, intellectually leading an emergent ruling coalition, pressed for “a sudden acceleration of liberalization.” The technocrats, “the voice of prudent caution, resisting pressure for too rapid

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23) A glowing but incomplete account of Razaleigh’s eventual success in obtaining better terms than those initially offered by the foreign oil companies is given in Gill (1987, 132–143). In the event, Razaleigh lost his position (Jesudason 1989).

24) Unless it was because “with their economic bias, the engineers tend to exude the type of entrepreneurial government reminiscent of Sutowo” (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 16, 1980, 44, cited in Milne [1982, 407]), that is, an advocate (whatever his failings) of an interventionist state that would compete with or control private enterprise. Compare this with the note that in Chile the “neo-liberal model of development . . . meant the end of the entrepreneur state and the establishment of the market as the principal mechanism for the allocation of resources” (Huneus 2000, 471).

25) Referring to this policy conflict, Gills (1996, 680) presciently observed, on the basis of “salutary lessons of some Latin American cases in the 1970s and 1980s, and of Russia,” that, “Financial liberalization is clearly the most potentially dangerous or economically disruptive process of accelerated opening.”

opening of the financial sector,” was “more skeptical, partly out of principle and partly out of a perceived challenge to technocratic management powers” (Gills 1996, 672, 681, 683). Ironically, when rapid financial liberalization, among other things, led to the collapse of the South Korean won in late 1997, the IMF, a leading opponent of East Asian “financial repression,” would project itself as an enlightened technocracy that would set an errant South Korean state right (Hall 2003). However, in Singapore, which had weathered the 1997 crisis rather well, technocrats who manage the state’s massive financial assets have had to fend off criticisms by domestic and global market competitors and investors who urged higher degrees of transparency and disclosure from the technocrat-managed government-linked corporations (Rodan 2004, 483).

In retrospect, it mattered significantly when or how technocrats emerged, during rapid growth and major social transformation, or at moments of severe crisis and externally imposed adjustment. Comparing the quality of technocracy in four African nations, Bangura (1994, 52) broadly suggests that “sustained growth enables the state to nurture a technocratic class” having “solid bonds . . . to the state apparatus and the principal institutions from which technocrats are recruited.” “Profound crisis and tough programmes of economic reform,” however, can lead to “de-professionalization” so that while “multilateral funding agencies . . . export their expertise and shape the agenda of change,” working with what local experts can be recruited, the resultant technocracy is “fraught with problems since the institutional settings from which it springs are in crisis” and its reproduction “at the same level of quality . . . becomes a difficult problem in the long-run” (*ibid.*, 52–53).

One can appreciate Bangura’s insight against the high-quality East Asian technocracies’ record of directing relatively autonomous and highly rewarding paths of development via state-led late industrialization. In Japan and the East Asian newly-industrializing economies, technocrats wielded a firm hand in transforming their economies. They used industrial policy in its many manifestations: promoting strategic industries, nurturing select corporations, allocating resources preferentially, maintaining different methods of protectionism, and periodically rationalizing the structures of important sectors. The East Asian technocracies by no means made their economic history free from crisis. Japan’s unconditional surrender and military occupation, South Korea’s wartime destruction, the Taiwanese regime’s retreat from a lost civil war, and Singapore’s risky secession from Malaysia were not circumstances the respective technocrats could have chosen. Nor were their regimes exemplars of liberal democracy: three out of four of them were authoritarian and two of those were military dictatorships for long periods. Yet, driven by economic nationalism, diligently “governing the market,” and operating with high state capacities, the technocracies pushed their programs of industrialization and struc-



tural transformation to competitive global-scale progress in a range of import-substituting and export-oriented industries.

The “East Asian experience” showed that technocracy’s efficacy or achievement could not be a matter of using, patronizing, or even insulating technocrats alone. The policy-making role and contributions of technocracy were bound to the ways states organized and managed their structures of political economy, including institutions, centers of power, markets, and relations with the global economy. The authoritarian Northeast Asian states that pursued late industrialization within a short period, for instance, would pick and subsidize their favored “winners” but would require of the latter outstanding performance, both the support and the discipline being elements of a coherent strategy of economic development targeting rapid growth, industrial advance, and market competitiveness. Designing and implementing such agendas, technocracy could make its efficacy, even its self-interest, an integral part of a project of economic nationalism vis-à-vis an ever-possible foreign domination.

Such a narrative of East Asian industrial success is too well rehearsed to bear further recounting here.<sup>26)</sup> Suffice it to add that if the East Asian technocrats began in crisis, they progressed to growth, reproducing themselves into the bargain. They were nurtured in select educational institutions, recruited via elitist methods, cohesively organized in strong agencies and ministries, bonded to well-defined policy agendas, insulated from popular pressures by strong regimes for long periods, and empowered by diverse forms of legal, bureaucratic, and political support.<sup>27)</sup> The process of technocratic reproduction

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26) For a few authoritative accounts, see Johnson (1982), Amsden (1989), Rodan (1989), and Wade (1990).

27) In instructive contrast, from Bangura (1994, 46): “The Nigerian technocracy arose out of a deep socio-economic crisis and a far reaching process of economic and political restructuring. It is recruited informally through a variety of ways, the principal ones being contacts with military officers, business elites, politicians, top bureaucrats, and ethnic pressure groups, and visibility in professional organizations and public debates. It is a fairly large group, with considerable input from academics. Except for the early formulation of the economic reform program, which required some level of foreign input, the group has a solid indigenous base, oil revenues having played a role in creating a large pool of trained academics, bureaucrats, and professionals. Given the nature of its recruitment and its contradictory interests and orientations, it has not developed any consistently clear set of ideas that have remained dominant for any considerable period, except in certain areas of economic reform where neoliberalism has been forced upon the policy makers by the multilateral funding agencies and creditors. It has not been a very stable force, given the constant changes in policy, rules and personnel by the political leadership. This instability derives partly from the pressures exerted by a very open civil society, which provides a fertile environment for the regime’s manipulation of the political process, exacerbating the problem of creating a closed and predictable administrative system for the technocrats. Despite the inputs made into many aspects of public policy, the Nigerian technocrat remains largely ineffective in terms of influencing key outcomes and the general direction of change.”

possibly went furthest where it could be most fully controlled, namely, in the small state of Singapore where the boundaries between ruling-party politicians and senior state technocrats were blurred in the making of “a self-conscious, self-righteous class of talented and brilliant people with strong character, who are imbued with a collective sense of purpose and a consciously collective understanding of the thinking of the group” (Barr 2006, 6). Advancing their way to a “miracle,” against the grain of international economic orthodoxy, these technocrats reached what was probably technocracy’s pinnacle, at any rate outside the western developed states.

Without idealizing Northeast Asia (and allowing for Singapore to be part of it in all but geography), it is instructive to contrast it with Southeast Asia to see how the character of actually functioning technocracy, in relation to its ideal, can be malformed or deformed within the framework of political economy. The position and potential of the technocracies of pre-1997 crisis Southeast Asia were curtailed by regimes that mimicked the “Japanese model,” the “South Korean model,” or the “Taiwanese model.” The Southeast Asian regimes, insulated from popular pressure, from foreign direct investment, and, it might be said, from technocracy itself, turned large sectors of the economy into oligarchic preserves. What could technocracy, implying rational policy- and decision-making based on the rule of law and “good governance,” achieve against the organized, state-managed, predatory, or rent-seeking conduct of Marcos’s family and the Filipino tycoons, Soeharto’s children and the Indonesian *cukong*, Mahathir’s coalitions of “Umnoputras” and cronies, and the “Bangkok big business” of Thailand?

Senior technocrats were responsible for maintaining macro-economic stability. Perhaps they balked at the misdeeds of the powerful. Perhaps they urged “good economics” against “bad politics.” By the overall record, however, technocracy often labored as the instrument of nothing nobler than a “contractocracy.”<sup>28)</sup> For example, privatization was where technocrats might have excelled as makers of policy, setters of governance standards, and enforcers of rule compliance. Yet, as privatization accelerated, technocrats were shunted aside by political considerations. Leigh (1992, 120–121) noted that linkages between key individuals in the business and political elites “placed state regulators on the defensive . . . simply and effectively bypassed,” while institutionalized checks on regulatory power “suited the ‘oligarchs’ in the Philippines and the ‘timber tycoons’ of Malaysia.” By the late 1990s, Malaysia’s privatization had much in common with Indonesia’s where a “huge range of former public monopolies in oil distribution and contract-

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28) “. . . the oligarchy collaborated with southern business elites, bureaucrats and transnationals though the corrupt National Party of Nigeria, to turn the country into a ‘Contractocracy’” (Bangura 1994, 27).

ing, power generation, telecommunications, toll road and port construction and operation were now passed, usually without tender, into the hands of the major oligarchs” (Robison 2004, 409).<sup>29</sup> And when the Thai political system was transformed, businesses “could no longer deal primarily with bureaucrats and technocrats, but had to negotiate deals with frequently-changing ministers in a series of governments” (McCargo and Ukrist 2005, 25).

### **Techno-Political Fusion**

The politics of technocracy’s relationship to development goes deeper. Referring to the South Korean technocracy’s caution in opening and liberalizing their financial sector, Gills (1996, 683) contended that

Beyond the self-interest of the technocrats . . . there is the issue of the “right to development,” even if via some of the old methods of protection and state guidance. What was precisely so remarkable about the “strong state” NICs was they succeeded in industrializing and creating national capital and wealth in the Third World.

Beyond the “right to development,” however, the accumulating evidence—from Japan and the newly industrialized countries (NICs) of East Asia, to China and “Rhineland capitalism”—is clear:

for most countries, and certainly most “latecomers” to industrialization, national success in the global marketplace depends on coherent long-term strategic action by state, and the construction and maintenance of a dense web of “intermediate” institutions (banks, financial and technical services, training, and infrastructure of all kinds) that the market needs but does not provide. (Leys 1996, 195)

In the post-war, Keynesian, pro-development milieu that supported “long-term strategic action by the state,” the “web of intermediate institutions” would be the realm of technocrats of many kinds. Then and there, technocracy would not just pick up the pieces of shattered government but deploy its “human resources” as a critical element of competitive advantage. Since the 1970s, however, neoliberal globalization had steadily whittled the path of relatively autonomous state-led, technocracy-implemented development so that:

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29) For an excellent study of the political and economic sources of the failure of four major privatization projects in Malaysia, which symbolized the failure of Mahathir’s privatization as a whole, see Tan (2008).

The era of national economies and national economic strategies is past—for the time being, at least. With capital free to move where it wishes, no state (and least of all a small poor one) can pursue any economic policy that the owners of capital seriously dislike. . . . It is hardly too much to say that by the end of the 1980s the only development policy that was officially approved was not to have one—to leave it to the market to allocate resources, not the state. (*ibid.*, 23–24)

“In the World Bank’s own ingenuous language,” adds Leys (*ibid.*, 24), “new ideas stress prices as signals; trade and competition as links to technical progress; and effective government as a scarce resource, to be employed sparingly and only where most needed.” And for most nations, to use Andre Gunder Frank’s language, “Now neo-liberalism, post-Keynesianism and neo-structuralism have . . . become totally irrelevant and bankrupt for development policy. In the real world, the order of the day has become only economic or debt crisis management” (cited in *ibid.*).

After the 1997 financial crisis, the neoliberal agendas that IMF’s intervention imposed via the extant regimes met with oligarchic resistance coupled with popular opposition. As it happened, debt management, structural adjustment, and deeper integration with the global system did not replace “crony capitalism” with the orderly self-regulating markets envisioned by neoliberalism. Almost exactly the feared opposites happened. Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai’s part-nationalist, part-oligarchic, and part-populist movement remade Thai politics only to create untidy scenes of half-hearted policy reforms, incomplete agendas, and recurring political turmoil (Kasian 2006; Glassman 2004; Pasuk and Baker 2004). Of the institutionalization of a “vast system of benefices and rents” in post-Soeharto Indonesia that defined the state’s relationships with capitalists, cronies, and “fixers,” it has been said that

[t]his was not a world where “rational” technocrats simply negotiated their way through the constraints of powerful interests, both within and outside the state. This was a vast and crudely instrumental system of state power where public authority and private interest were fused and where state capitalism gave way to the rise of politico-business oligarchies emerging from within the state itself. (Robison and Hadiz 2004, 30)

These developments showed how ineffectual was the beneficent impact of technocracy on political economy in times of crises, precisely when, it was always thought, technocracy would best fulfill its role. Still, such developments are far from being the precursors of any “end of technocracy.” If anything, they seem uncannily to bring matters back to the politics of the “technocratic model of modernization,” albeit in different guises. For China, it has been hoped that “reformists” and “leftists” who had fought each other would be swept aside by “a third force of market-friendly authoritarian technocrats” whose “post-totalitarian technocratic authoritarianism,” “pragmatic authoritarianism,”

“political authoritarianism,” or “limited authoritarianism,” however one wants to call it, evidently represents a gradual movement towards a “democratic idea [that] has just appeared on the horizon” (Xiao 2003, 61–65). For other important reasons, too, technocrats may ironically be more needed than ever before:

in a world where the liberal notion of a progressive and autonomous civil society becomes a threat to markets, neoliberals were drawn to the idea of “change teams” or “technopols” able to stand above the clash of vested interests and rent-seekers and to impose collective welfare benefits of markets on society. Neoliberal agendas clearly required a political formulation in which these technocratic policy-makers might be insulated from the raids of predatory interests. (Robison 2004, 415)

Perhaps closest to this scenario of a neoliberal, market-fundamentalist world where technocrats stood above venal interests was a political trend that washed over Latin America during the 1990s. Here and now, technocracy and politics met, or were encouraged to meet, so that not old and insulated technocrats but new and politically blooded “technopols” would arise to bear the task of “freeing markets and politics” (Domínguez 1997). As Centeno showed of the Mexican *tecnócratas* led by Carlos Salinas, a “hybrid” elite had triumphed who seemed ideally to combine the educational credentials of the *técnicos* with the political access and acumen of the *políticos* (Centeno 1994, 106). Their program of *salinastroika* meant joining the “global revolution of the market” within which the states of the developing world “reduced public subsidies, competed for links with the developed economies and investment capital from multinationals, and sought to prove their ‘fiscal responsibility’” (*ibid.*, 21). In plain and hard-nosed terms,

[c]ountries that play the game dictated by either creditors or other potential sources of capital are rewarded with investments or new loans. Exporters of primary materials may find that the international markets are only open to those producers that respect a certain set of rules. In the most extreme interpretations of this situation, reforming governments have lost their autonomy over economic policy and must follow the dictates of external powers. But even in less dramatic cases the promise of extra capital or the threat of curtailment has an obvious effect on government decisions. (*ibid.*, 22)

There appears to be nothing new under the technocratic sun after all. It has been technocracy’s game to manage that envisioned national-global interface over and over again in a relatively long trajectory that took technocracy into orthodox development, crisis intermediation, debt management, structural adjustment, and neoliberal marketization. If such is the situation in which the technocratic ideal finds its culmination, it must do so in a severely truncated form.

There is no doubt that technocracy exerts a persistent appeal: when all is said and done, who would not want to replace a “strong and demagogic discourse used in the past” with a “technocratic approach” that promised “rational solutions” to social and economic problems (Silva 1991, 410)? Yet any technocratic separation of the economic from the political was likely to be false. Even the “Chicago Boys” were only a subset of the “ODEPLAN Boys” who formed the economic twin to the “Gremialists” whose political project to entrench authoritarian rule was no less important to Pinochet’s regime than neoliberal economic restructuring (Huneus 2000). There was never an intention to separate economics from politics for all the talk of insulating “good economics” from “bad politics.” Thus, in mid-1980s’ Chile, “paradoxically, the opposition to authoritarian rule also adopted an increasingly technocratic character” whereby the “CIEPLAN Monks” (an influential group of technocrats in the democratic government) vouchsafed their professional credentials in reply to the presumed technical superiority of the Chicago Boys (Silva 1991, 386, and fn. 3). And to a smaller degree, such a form of the technocratization of politics can be present, too, in Malaysia where Anwar Ibrahim leads a nascent opposition coalition that proffers a new economic agenda, one that is not sullied by cronyism, but supposedly strengthened with technocratic competence and professionalism.<sup>30)</sup>

Beyond that, it seems premature to think that the technocrats, technopols and *tecnócratas* have triumphed. For several years now in Latin America, political movements that bring together assertive indigenism, radical populism, and resurgent regionalism have haunted neoliberalism. In one country after the next, “the strong populist and demagogic discourse used in the past” has reasserted itself in renewed demands for social equity and justice, indigenous rights and re-nationalization, and the construction of regionalism and regional solidarity:

A string of New Left governments has emerged beginning with Hugo Chavez in Venezuela in 1999 followed by Luis Inacio “Lula” da Silva in Brazil in 2003. They have been joined by the election of left of center presidents in Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Nicaragua, Paraguay and El Salvador. (Burbach 2009)

From that view, a “Bolivarian tide” threatens to topple technocratization from its imagined height. Whether or not it succeeds, its points are clear: politics and technocracy

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30) Among the features of the technocratization of Chilean politics, according to Silva (1991), was the growth of private research institutes which supplied a counter-technocratic response to the regimes. Recently, in Malaysia, research institutes not linked to state-sponsored think tanks have begun to offer professional and technocratic critiques and counter-proposals to state policies.

remain each other's bane since the one cannot insulate the other, not for long, not ultimately. There may just have to be another game in town!

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