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The Influence of Oligarchy on Southeast Asian Power Structures: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract: *Oligarchy has been present in various political systems, including democracies and autocracies. The policies of oligarchs have often influenced the political and economic landscapes of both developed and developing countries. Several factors have contributed to the rise of oligarchy in the region, including colonial legacies, constitutional monarchies, one-party dominance, family-led leadership, bureaucratic governance, and transitional democracy. Within this context, Southeast Asia has experienced significant economic growth over the past few decades, which has also influenced the development of oligarchic structures. What factors contribute to the political power of oligarchs in Southeast Asian nations? What strategies do these oligarchs employ to exert influence over political processes and outcomes? The study posits that the strength and influence of Southeast Asian oligarchs are largely derived from their deep connections with established political dynasties, as well as their strong relationships with key state institutions and prominent economic groups. These connections not only bolster their political clout but also facilitate their ability to navigate and manipulate the political landscape to their advantage. Despite these oligarchs' overwhelming influence on national politics—bolstered by deeply ingrained cultural norms and stringent social governance—Southeast Asia has managed to achieve considerable development. This study seeks to provide insights that can influence policy related to oligarchy and economic development while also serving as a direction for future research.*

Keywords: Oligarchy; power; political systems; economic development; political influence; governance; Southeast Asia.

Introduction

Oligarchy is a term frequently encountered in the realm of global politics, denoting a system of governance where power is concentrated in the hands of a small, elite

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group. This concept has increasingly surfaced as a vital framework for analyzing and interpreting the political landscape of various nations, allowing observers to better understand the complexities and influences that shape governance and policy decisions (Winters, 2011a). Oligarchy has been present in various political systems, including democracies and autocracies. The political and economic landscapes of both developed and developing countries have often been influenced by the policies of oligarchs. Furthermore, globalization has exacerbated the income gap between the wealthy and the poor, contributing to the rise of the oligarchic system. This growing disparity in income and wealth can be observed globally. For example, in the Middle East, less than 1% of the population controls a significant portion of the wealth. Similarly, in developed countries like the United States, the top 1% owns approximately 40% of the country's total wealth (Winters & Page, 2009). Oligarchy is likely a common form within the global political economy. However, the concept of oligarchy has been effectively used to analyze the social and political structures of Southeast Asian nations (Bourguignon & Verdier, 2000; Winters & Page, 2009).

Like many other regions in the world, the oligarchical structure in Southeast Asia has strengthened alongside its growing economic rise and interaction with the global economy, attracting the attention of policymakers and political analysts. In Southeast Asian politics, the prevalence of oligarchs in power has become increasingly common. Several factors have contributed to the rise of oligarchy in the region, including colonial legacies, the presence of constitutional monarchies, one-party dominance, family-led leadership, bureaucratic governance, and transitional democracy. Furthermore, Southeast Asia has experienced significant economic growth over the past few decades, which has also influenced the development of oligarchic structures (Laothamatas, 1997; Winters, 2012). The contemporary democratic system of Southeast Asia is characterized by party oligarchy, which has played a significant role in controlling political parties in the region (Winters, 2011a; Robison & Hadiz, 2017; Tomsa, 2018). Consequently, understanding the nature, source of power, and position of oligarchs in Southeast Asian politics has become an important focus in recent years.

Most previous studies on South Asia have mainly concentrated on the development of oligarchy within the economic and political structures of Southeast Asia. These studies particularly examine oligarchy under military regimes and explore the potential impact of a wealth-based oligarchy on national politics (Rhoden, 2015; Robison, 2012; Slater & Kim, 2015). Southeast Asian politics involve issues such as labour, human rights, and the environment, which extend beyond national boundaries, leading to significant debates about modern political systems in the region (Ricks, 2016). However, they have often overlooked the shifting sources of oligarchs' power, the strategies employed to protect their interests, and the processes through which they are reconstituted, as well as their current status in Southeast Asian politics. This study aims to fill a significant gap in existing research by investigating the sources of power and the strategies employed by oligarchs in Southeast Asia while also examining the evolving dynamics of political influence in the region. Specifically, it seeks to answer two critical questions: What factors contribute to the political power of oligarchs in Southeast Asian nations? What strategies do these oligarchs employ to exert influence over political processes and outcomes? The study posits that the strength and influence of Southeast Asian oligarchs are largely derived from their deep connections with established political dynasties, as well as their strong relationships with key state institutions and prominent economic groups. These connections not only bolster their political clout but also facilitate their ability to navigate and manipulate the political landscape to their advantage.

Despite the considerable power held by these oligarchs, the study concludes that their presence has not necessarily impeded the overall development of the region. Interestingly, their influence has also not significantly fostered the processes of democratization and good governance throughout most of Southeast Asia, with Myanmar being a notable exception where such dynamics have played out differently. In Myanmar, oligarchs has strong controlled over both politics and business and private sector. "A small number of individuals used their personal proximity to powerful governing elites to manipulate the privatization process and secure concessions and near-monopolies" (Ford et al., 2016). This exploration sheds light on the complex interplay of power, politics, and governance in the Southeast Asian context, revealing the nuances of oligarchical influence on the region's political trajectory. This study aims to enhance the existing literature on oligarchs and their evolving role in Southeast Asian politics. Additionally, it seeks to provide insights that can influence policy related to oligarchy and economic development while also serving as a direction for future research.

The next section of the study delineates the research methods employed. The theoretical framework sections investigate the mechanisms by which oligarchs sustain their power, addresses explicitly the strategies utilized to safeguard the interests of oligarchs and analyses the process of oligarch reconstitution, while section four explores the role of oligarchy within Southeast Asian politics. Finally, the study concludes with a series of recommendations.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the structure and influence of oligarchs in Southeast Asian politics based on the research questions earlier posed. It analyzes a range of secondary documents, including policy papers, government reports, and publications from international research and consulting organizations. In addition to these documents, the study also draws on relevant books, academic articles, and newspaper reports. To facilitate the secondary data analysis through document examination, this research will explore the theoretical framework of oligarchy and contextualize it within the Southeast Asian region.

Oligarchy: A Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Oligarchy is a term frequently used but often poorly defined in the social sciences. The International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences describes oligarchy as “a form of government in which political power is held by a small minority.” It notes that the word comes from the Greek term “oligarchia,” which means “government of the few,” derived from “oligoi” (meaning “few”) and “arkhein” (meaning “to rule”) (Winters, 2011a, p.1). As Aristotle stated, oligarchy is the governance of the wealthiest citizens, who are always a minority (Winters & Page, 2009). Besides, “oligarchs are actors who command and control massive concentrations of material resources that can be deployed to defend or enhance their personal wealth or exclusive social position” (Winters, 2012, p.6). Leonard Whibley (2016) mentions that “oligarchy is a form of power structure in which power effectively rests with an elite class distinguished by royalty, wealth, family ties, commercial, and military legitimacy” (p. l5).

Oligarchy describes a small group with significant power, unity, and strong relationships. Oligarchy is a system of government ruled by individuals with significant wealth or income (Formisano, 2015). It is not a regime type and often disregards the comprehensive nature of oligarchs’ control through government (Rhoden, 2015). An oligarchy is a form of government in which a small group of elites, who are the most socially dominant among various social groups, hold power. These elites control access to wealth (Herrera & Martinelli, 2011; Winters, 2011a).

Therefore, while not all wealthy individuals can be classified as oligarchs, it is true that all oligarchs are, by definition, wealthy individuals (Hargens, 2020, p. 62).

Bases of Power of Oligarchs

Oligarchs are primarily driven by the desire to restrict the emergence of rival power groups and often work to undermine the middle class within society (Hargens, 2020). Wealth is at the heart of their influence, which is a crucial pillar of their power (Robinson & Hadiz, 2014). However, the foundations of their power are not singular; instead, they derive strength from multiple, robust centres. The policies implemented by oligarchs typically run counter to the well-being of ordinary citizens. Rather than promoting public welfare, these leaders prioritize their own interests, seeking to expand and preserve their influence through acts of corruption and authoritarian measures. This pursuit of power is further bolstered by strong institutional ties, which enable oligarchs to consolidate their control more effectively.

Moreover, the relationships oligarchs maintain with state bureaucracies enhance their ability to wield power. These connections allow them to navigate political landscapes while securing favorable outcomes for themselves. Beyond institutional connections, various non-material factors also play a significant role in solidifying their influence. Nationalism and populism can be wielded to galvanize support or create a sense of identity, while corporatism serves as a framework for the oligarchs to maintain their dominance and exert control over various sectors (Robinson & Hadiz, 2014).

The Ways of the Protection of Oligarchs' Interest

In numerous countries around the world, a complex interplay of cultural and behavioral factors has played a crucial role in ensuring the protection of oligarchs' interests. The remnants of colonial rule, alongside the grip of dictatorships and the dominance of one-party systems, further entrench oligarchic power dynamics, particularly evident in the political landscapes of Southeast Asia. In several democratic settings, prolonged tenures of prime ministers or the emergence of presidential dictatorships are strategically utilized to shield oligarchical interests from scrutiny and opposition. Moreover, the frameworks of capitalism and market economy often serve as protective barriers for these power structures (Robinson & Hadiz, 2014). Oligarchs typically cultivate robust social and political networks, enabling them to defend their interests against potential threats seamlessly. As articulated by Winters (2011, p. 18) and Rhoden (2015, p. 10), "material power is unique in that it allows oligarchs to purchase the sustained engagement of others who have no personal commitment to the goals of the oligarchs they serve."

This transactional relationship underscores the reality that oligarchs often resort to establishing their own institutions, crafting specific rules, and implementing regulations that serve to fortify their interests and maintain their regimes. Through these mechanisms, they weave a protective web around their power, ensuring its durability in the face of change.

Conditions of the Reconstitute of Oligarchs

The phenomenon of globalization has significantly magnified the disparities in the distribution of wealth and power worldwide. As this inequality becomes increasingly apparent, it has prompted large segments of the population to rise against established oligarchs in various regions. These uprisings reflect a broader discontent with the current socio-economic structures and have led to mass revolutions aimed at dismantling or reforming the oligarchic systems in place (Robinson & Hadiz, 2014).

The impact of these popular movements can be profound, with repercussions that include regional conflicts, civil wars, and various forms of internal strife, particularly observed in developing nations. These conflicts often arise from the desire to address grievances related to wealth concentration and lack of political representation. Furthermore, governmental reforms—whether in economic policy or political governance—sometimes serve to reinforce or reshape the existing oligarchical framework rather than genuinely dismantling it (Rhoden, 2015).

In the context of democratic governance, it is important to understand that the presence of an oligarchy does not completely eliminate the necessity for public involvement in the political process. As articulated by Premat (2016), formal participation in elections, referendums, and public polls is essential for the vitality of an oligarchy within a representative democracy. Such participation provides a façade of democratic legitimacy that allows oligarchs to maintain their influence while still being accountable to the electorate (Hargens, 2020, p. 70).

Moreover, ongoing political conflicts—often rooted in different ideological perspectives or political regimes—can play a significant role in the reconstitution of oligarchic power. These conflicts may arise from power struggles among elite factions, leading to a reestablishment of oligarchs who may adapt their strategies to fit the evolving political landscape (Khoo, 2018). Thus, the dynamic nature of political systems and popular discontent can create a cyclical pattern where oligarchs are both challenged and reconstituted in response to ongoing societal tensions.

The Position of Oligarchy in Southeast Asian Politics

Inequality has resulted in oligarchy and has become a global phenomenon within the architecture of the world political economy. According to the World Inequality Report 2022, global wealth disparities are significantly greater than those related to income. The bottom half of the global population holds an almost negligible amount of wealth, accounting for merely 2% of the total. Conversely, the wealthiest 10% controls a staggering 76% of global wealth. On average, individuals in the poorest half possess approximately Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) of around US$ 4,100 each, while the top 10% have an average wealth of around US$771,300) (World Inequality Report, 2022). According to Oxfam's analysis of data from the investment banking firm UBS, the wealth held by the top 1% now exceeds the total wealth of the bottom 95% (Johnson, 2024).

Southeast Asia, home to nearly 700 million people, stands as the fifth-largest economy in the world (Denson, 2024), yet it faces a troubling rise in inequality. In Thailand, for example, the wealthiest 10% command more than half of the national income, while in Singapore, this elite group takes home about 35%. This disparity is also evident in the burgeoning economy of Vietnam, where the richest 10% earn between 40% and 50% of the national income. These figures highlight a critical issue that demands urgent attention and action to foster a more equitable future for the region.

In Southeast Asia, Indonesia's oligarchy has deep roots that trace back to the Dutch colonial era, where a select few local minorities held significant power, shaping the nation's political landscape even after Sukarno's regime. Following independence, a new oligarchy emerged centered in Java and Jakarta (von Luebke, 2011; Winters, 2012). For four decades, Sukarno and Suharto exercised authoritarian control, severely stifling the processes of democratization and decentralization (von Luebke, 2011). However, the post-Suharto era has marked a pivotal shift, showcasing a gradual yet distinct movement toward democratic consolidation and social pluralism

(Diamond, 2010). This evolution underscores the resilience of Indonesia's political landscape and its potential for a more inclusive future.

Institutional reforms in Indonesia have led to what is described as 'dispersed authoritarianism' alongside the emergence of political cartels (Slater, 2004). Furthermore, local bossism (Hadiz, 2010) and a strong oligarchic presence have shaped the political landscape in Indonesia (Robison & Hadiz, 2004). In 1998, Suharto established a 'Sultanistic' form of oligarchy within the political system. Following the collapse of his authoritarian regime, there was a strong public expectation for change in the authoritarian political and economic structures. During Suharto's rule, political parties focused more on accumulating wealth than on fostering political openness and good governance (Robison & Hadiz, 2014). As a result, an electoral ruling oligarchy was formed under Suharto's regime.

Globalization has recently contributed to the development of a politico-business oligarchic structure in Indonesian politics. Additionally, a Military-Chinese coalition has influenced the emergence of new oligarchies (Ford & Pepinsky, 2014). After 1998, significant changes occurred in Indonesia's political institutions, leading the oligarchy to adapt by balancing democratic politics with the global market, thereby creating a favourable environment for politico-business interests. The bureaucracy has also reinforced this politico-bureaucratic oligarchy in Indonesia (Fukuoka, 2013; Robison & Hadiz, 2014).

Conversely, the political landscape of the Philippines has been significantly shaped by oligarchs since the latter part of the Spanish colonial era. This oligarchy was further solidified during the period of American colonial rule, leading to its institutionalization within the country's political framework. The political and institutional innovations implemented by the Americans facilitated the establishment of a national oligarchical structure (Anderson, 1998). Following the Marcos regime, traditional political families continued to exert considerable influence over the political arena, particularly evident during the 1987 national election. Consequently, the distribution of political power in the Philippines became horizontally fragmented and vertically concentrated, distinguishing it from other countries in the region, such as Indonesia. Furthermore, unlike the Philippines, using hard power to obtain political leverage is not typically seen in Indonesia. Nevertheless, recent trends indicate a notable rise in the formation of political family dynasties and a growing reliance on violence that threatens the integrity of Indonesia's democracy (Sopian, 2014).

The regime of Ferdinand Marcos was characterized by a well-established oligarchy centred in Manila, which has exerted influence over the Philippines for over a century. In contrast to the oligarchic structures in Indonesia, the Filipino system lacks an ethnic basis. Within the contemporary presidential and parliamentary frameworks, the cyclical nature of power among oligarchs presents a challenge to the incumbents. The presidency has emerged as a pivotal position in preserving political oligarchy. Marcos implemented martial law and introduced a 'sultanistic' form of oligarchy that prioritized wealth protection among oligarchs. It is essential to recognize that the oligarchy in the Philippines is rooted in landowning family leadership and is supported by a market economy alongside regional and local electoral structures (Winters, 2012).

In Thailand, bureaucracy and the military have historically exerted considerable influence over the political landscape. Following the military coup in 1991, civil society experienced a degree of strengthening, albeit without significant political reforms, which led to network-based politics. This paradigm shifted in 2001 when Thaksin Shinawatra assumed the role of prime minister (McCargo, 2005).

Since 1992, Thailand has undergone three critical political crises: the first was the legitimacy crisis of the Chavalit government that stemmed from the baht deflation in July 1997; the second involved the Thaksin asset declaration controversy in 2001; and the third was marked by the collapse of state legitimacy in the Southern border provinces in 2004. Furthermore, the Prem and Constitutional Court Crisis of 2001 represents another pivotal moment in Thai political history. These events have shaped the contemporary oligarchic system in Thailand (McCargo, 2005). Moreover, Rhoden (2015) contends that certain political outcomes in Thailand are not adequately explained without reference to a modern interpretation of oligarchic theory and analysis (p. 1).

The nature of oligarchy in Singapore is distinct from that in other Southeast Asian nations. In Singapore, the term "civil oligarchy" describes a system of governance that prioritizes the rule of law over individual authority. Following the nation's independence, Lee Kuan Yew exercised considerable power, shaping the political landscape into what can be characterized as a 'Sultanistic oligarchy.' He consolidated this power through the People's Action Party and the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB). As a result, the politico-juridical framework emphasising the rule of law has significantly shaped the contemporary oligarchical system in Singapore (Winters, 2012).

In contrast, Malaysia's oligarchy comprises affluent individuals or groups with political influence and economic power, who formulate public policies primarily to serve their interests. Mahathir Mohammad's regime also contributed to the transformation of the Malaysian oligarchy into a new configuration. Nonetheless, this change has been marked by ongoing turbulence, rooted in a complex nexus of state, ethnicity, and class dynamics (Khoo, 2018, p. 227).

The analysis highlights the intricate relationship between the economy of Southeast Asia and its oligarchical structure, which is characterized by a concentration of wealth and power among a small elite. This oligarchy plays a significant role in exacerbating income and economic disparities across the region, creating a stark divide between the rich and the poor. Despite these oligarchs' overwhelming influence on national politics—bolstered by deeply ingrained cultural norms and stringent social governance—Southeast Asia has managed to achieve considerable development. However, Myanmar has been significantly affected by its military oligarchs and is currently grappling with a bloody civil war. This conflict has notably altered the country's political landscape and impacted the existing oligarchic structure. Despite these challenges, it is remarkable that the region has not followed the Western model of democracy strictly, showcasing its unique capacity to evolve and prosper under its own political and economic systems.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, it can be asserted that oligarchy plays a significant role in the political economy of Southeast Asia. During the initial period of independence for these nations, the development of oligarchical structures was influenced by colonial institutions and nationalist movements. However, with the advent of populism, ruling families have reshaped oligarchic patterns by establishing strong connections with state institutions and economic groups. The existence of monarchies and presidential and prime ministerial systems has further contributed to the emergence of new forms of oligarchy within the region. Additionally, military and influential local elites have established their presence in countries such as Myanmar, Indonesia, and Thailand.

In an effort to safeguard their wealth, both Indonesia and the Philippines have endured undemocratic practices for many years. Conversely, while Singapore exhibits certain non-democratic traits, its oligarchy is largely governed by the rule of law and principles of justice. Moreover, the structure of Southeast Asian oligarchies has been profoundly affected by global capital inflows, which have transformed the oligarchical frameworks in Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia.

It is essential to recognize that the oligarchic system in Southeast Asia has not significantly obstructed good governance and economic development, distinguishing it from the oligarchical systems observed in other regions. Oligarchies typically emerge when political power is concentrated among a limited number of individuals or groups, often resulting from inadequate participation, ineffective governance, and insufficient state control over resource distribution. Thus, in the context of Southeast Asia, it is pertinent to mention that, the "incubation" of oligarchy through the cultivation of personal connections and forms of patronage, observing that these oligarchs "arise at or near the center of the regime, and are dependent on their oligarchic incubator sometimes for decades until they develop the means to pose challenges" (Winters, 2011, p. 138). The modern state is not immune to the proliferation of oligarchy, as it is an inherent feature of capitalist societies. Nevertheless, the Southeast Asian state faces challenges in implementing various measures, such as regulations and conditions, to promote societal betterment. This study underscores the necessity for additional research into the conditions that govern transitions among business and political elites, particularly in contexts where substantial wealth accumulation enables an individual with crony connections to reshape power dynamics within Southeast Asian society.

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