

Graduate School of Global Studies, Sophia University
Symposium and Workshop Series 2023-2024

Symposium Report: Situating Democracy in Southeast Asia: Democratic Deficits, Challenges & Perspectives

Authors & Organizers: Khoompetch Kongsawat & Michelle M. Sta. Romana

Date and Time: 27th January 2024 (Sat.) 13:00-17:00

Place: Bldg. 2 Rm. 1702, Sophia University, Tokyo, Japan

Participants:

Keynote Speaker

- *Calling Out Autocratization: Pushback Against Backsliding in Southeast Asia* by Prof. Mark R. Thompson, Chair Professor, Department of Public and International Affairs and Director, Southeast Asia Research Centre, City University of Hong Kong / Visiting Research Scholar, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University

Student Presenters

- *Ethnonationalism, Democracy Struggles and Grassroots Political Change* by Sinwa Naw, Ph.D. student in Global Studies, Sophia University
- *The Decline of Authoritarian Regime in Thailand?* by Khoompetch Kongsawat, Ph.D. student in Global Studies, Sophia University
- *Contested Development in the Myth of the Marcosian 'Golden Age' in the Philippines* by Michelle M. Sta. Romana, Ph.D. student in Global Studies, Sophia University
- *The Milk Tea Alliance and Its Implication on Southeast Asia and Beyond*, Tuwanont Phattharathanasut, Ph.D. student in Asia-Pacific Studies, Waseda University

Commentators

- Prof. Takeshi Ito, Professor, Graduate Program in Global Studies, Sophia University
- Prof. Koichi Nakano, Professor, Graduate Program in Global Studies, Sophia University

Chairperson

- Joshua Arsenio V. Espiritu III, Sophia University / Ateneo de Manila University

Summary

The hybrid symposium explored contemporary characteristics of Southeast Asia's democratic resistance during a global advancement of autocratization. The two-session event commenced with an introduction from chairperson Joshua Espiritu III, followed by opening remarks by Professor Sven Saaler, Dean of the Graduate School of Global Studies.

The first session was a keynote address by Professor Mark R. Thompson. Prof. Thompson's address outlined the contemporary history of democratic challenges in Southeast Asian countries, both contextualizing the unique character of authoritarian backsliding in the region and reminding the audience how governments can disguise and legitimize autocratization. Amidst this, Prof. Thompson emphasized the key factors that consolidate forces behind a pushback against autocratization, and how they might succeed or fail.

The second session consisted of four presentations from Ph.D. students from Sophia and Waseda Universities, which were each accompanied by brief remarks from the commentators; Professors Takeshi Ito and Koichi Nakano of the Graduate Program of Global Studies, Sophia University.

The first student presenter, Sinwa Naw from Sophia University, presented his research on Myanmar's grassroots political struggles amidst prevailing ethno-nationalist movements and fledgling democratization in Myanmar before the 2021 coup. In the fight against authoritarianism, ethnonationalism and pro-democracy movements emerged as core political aspirations in the struggle for democracy. Neither ethnonationalism nor the pursuit of democracy has adequately addressed the need for grassroots political change, particularly in resource governance during the democratization period. Elite political actors overlooked the fundamental change needed at the grassroots level. Thus, grassroots activists are challenging both democratic actors and ethnonationalist leaders to increase accountability and transparency regarding resource conflicts and environmental justice. Despite threats to and restrictions on political mobilization, grassroots activism pushes back against democratic backsliding, resulting from top-down practices in resource governance pursued by the state and ethnonationalist leaders.

The second student presenter, Khoompetch Kongsawat, presented his working paper on contemporary Thai politics, particularly on the junta's legacies. His research claimed that despite some of the main democratic settings in Thailand such as multiparty elections, constitution, and competitive politics, implants from the junta such as senators, the Election Commission of Thailand, and the Constitutional Court, remain well intact and function in their favor. Even though the junta seemed to lose the 2023 general election, it found its way back to keep things under its control.

After a brief intermission, the third student presenter, Michelle Sta. Romana, presented how President Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos, Jr. emerged three decades later as a perceived solution to the systemic exclusion of the Philippine masses. The "Golden Age" myth—prosperity under the authoritarian rule of Marcos Sr.—is argued to be a powerful discourse of development, rife with controversial contestations from supporters. Going beyond the disinformation explanation, Michelle's observations suggest that Marcos supporter narratives hint at routinely neglected affective logics that construct Marcos supporters' memories of the myth of the Marcosian 'Golden Age'.

The fourth student presenter, Tuwanont Phattharathanasut from Waseda University, presented his research on the Milk Tea Alliance (MTA), a transregional movement operating in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand, Myanmar, and other countries. Tuwanont intimated that this Alliance is not contingent on the internet platforms, but rather the pre-existing personal relationships among the youth activists who share information and insights regarding the movements.

The symposium concluded a brief Q&A session from the audience (both in person and online). The final remarks from both Prof. Thompson and the commentators emphasized the struggle against democratic backsliding in Southeast Asian countries, the specific character of their democratic barriers, and the importance of looking within the movements against autocratization in Southeast Asia and beyond.