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Political Psychology of Southeast Asia

Ali Mashuri
University of Brawijawa

Idhamsyah Eka Putra
Persada Indonesia University

Cristina J. Montiel
Ateneo de Manila University, cmontiel@ateneo.edu

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Political Psychology of Southeast Asia

Ali Mashuri[1], Idhamsyah Eka Putra[2,3], Cristina Montiel[4]

[1] *Department of Psychology, Universitas Brawijaya, Malang City, Indonesia.* [2] *Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Persada Indonesia, Jakarta, Indonesia.* [3] *Division for Applied Social Psychology Research (DASPR), Jakarta, Indonesia.* [4] *Department of Psychology, Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City, Philippines.*

Abstract

This special thematic section spotlights the current state of political psychology in Southeast Asia. Drawing from various research methodologies, five papers published in this special thematic section provide psychological insights into different political topics in the past and present-day Southeast Asia, including 1) Islam and politics; 2) terrorist labelling; 3) violence against minorities; 4) moralised policies; and 5) vote-buying. Overall, this special thematic section contributes to the understanding of the political psychology of non-WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) populations, particularly in Southeast Asia. The need for more publications with non-WEIRD samples in the field of political psychology is discussed, as are some strategies to actualise this goal.

Keywords

Southeast Asia is a subregion of Asia located northwest of Australia, south of Mainland China, and east of the Indian subcontinent, which is home to more than 663 million people. It is currently the world's third most populous geographical sub-region after South Asia and East Asia ("South-Eastern Asia population", 2019). The economies of Southeast Asia, despite some challenges, are predicted to grow in the future (Kuusinen et al., 2019) and this sub-region has played a major role in the politics of Asia (Caballero-Anthony, 2014). These factors show that Southeast Asia, along with its people and socio-political dynamics, deserve attention. Unfortunately, however, most empirical research published in leading psychological journals is based on WEIRD (i.e., Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic; Henrich et al., 2010) samples (Rad et al., 2018), thus under-representing Southeast Asia.

Such reliance on a confined population of participants is problematic because it can limit the external validity (Ceci et al., 2010) of existing psychological research, raising the question of how much current psychological literature applies to other, underrepresented populations such as those in Southeast Asia (Cheon et al., 2020). It also may overlook the existence of local or indigenous people with their unique societal problems (Allwood & Berry, 2006; Brock, 2014). This raises the question of how much the existing psychological research performs a good job in identifying and formulating new psychological theories and concepts to elucidate and solve societal problems specific to an individual cultural group (Cheung et al., 2011). Additionally, Kahalon et al. (2022) revealed bias in research evaluation in which research from non-WEIRD countries has received less scientific attention than research from WEIRD countries, particularly from the United States. What is more, high-impact psychology journals are mostly written in English (Liu, 2017; Vera-Baceta

et al., 2019). Taken together, these observations suggest that authors from non-English speaking countries who use non-WEIRD samples in their research may have little chance of success when publishing their work in top psychology journals (Tindle, 2021).

To address and counter these issues, this special thematic section of the Journal of Social and Political Psychology (JSPP) invited scholars, particularly those affiliated with Southeast Asian academic institutions, to publish their empirical manuscripts that highlight socio-political issues in Southeast Asia and that sample data from Southeast Asian participants. Our point of departure in proposing the special section was that, first, as was advocated by various researchers, reviewers, and journal editors, psychological science needs to diversify its field's knowledge base (Bulhan, 2015; Rad et al., 2018; Thalmayer et al., 2021). Second, psychological science can move forward by using data across diverse samples and contexts as a reflective way to infer to what extent politico-psychological behaviours are universal or culture-specific (Bernardo et al., 2022; IJzerman et al., 2021; Medin, 2017).

Political Psychology of Southeast Asia: Common Issues

One of the defining characteristics of Southeast Asia is the religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity of peoples living in the sub-region (Arphattananon, 2021; Mccloud, 2018). In Indonesia, for example, the world's largest archipelago country, there are approximately 1340 recognised ethnic groups with their unique languages, cultures, and religions (Muluk et al., 2018). This complex demography poses a challenge to most Southeast Asian countries as it can induce multifarious socio-political problems. Separatist movement is just one example, currently fought by Papuans in Indonesia, Moro people in Mindanao, the southern Philippines, and Muslims in the Malay Patani Region in southern Thailand (Chalk, 2001). Another socio-political problem that is no less salient is the rise of religious radicalism (Putra, 2016b; Rabasa, 2014; Southwick, 2015). Indonesia is currently in urgent need of solving this extremism, as are the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore (Nahdohdin et al., 2019). There is of course a wide range of socio-political problems besides separatism and religious radicalism striking Southeast Asian countries. Contentious majority-minority relations or intergroup conflicts arise from plural, multi-ethnic, religious, and cultural societies across countries in Southeast Asia (Clarke, 2001; Montiel & Noor, 2009). Therefore, Southeast Asia serves as an important example of a setting within which models of reconciliation (Mashuri et al., 2018) and multiculturalism are implemented (Noor & Leong, 2013) to manage ethnoreligious tensions and prevent intergroup violence.

Environmental concerns (e.g., deforestation, biodiversity losses, pollution) also constitute one of the problems in Southeast Asian countries (Simpson, 2017). The Environmental Performance Index (EPI; Hsu & Zomer, 2014) is a widely used method of quantifying a country's environmental performance, with lower scores indicating more serious, unresolved environmental problems. The latest survey in 2020 demonstrated that, among 180 countries, Southeast Asian countries, specifically Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, and Indonesia, scored relatively low in the EPI ("Results Overview, 2020 EPI Results", 2020).

Southeast Asian countries likewise share common experiences in transitions from authoritarianism to democracy (Acharya, 2003) accompanied by political uncertainty and instability. Democratic transitions open up new political freedoms through which people learn to articulate aspirations and dissent. The political psychology of Southeast Asia hence is linked to topics about political change such as, among other things, leadership, voting behaviours, and collective action (Montiel, 2006), as well as fake news and populism that mark the current post-truth era (Mashuri et al., 2022).

In addition to the domestic issues as put forward above, regional and cross-border issues are likewise worth mentioning. The most prominent example is territorial disputes, which, for example, pit Indonesia against Malaysia, Malaysia against the Philippines, and Thailand against Cambodia (Jenne, 2017). Another relevant regional issue includes migration crises (e.g., migrant workers, refugees; Bosma, 2019). Such interstate conflicts may render Southeast Asians to hold negative stereotypes of each other, and may likewise shape whether Southeast Asians carry positive or negative attitudes toward cooperative cross-country relations (e.g., Mashuri et al., 2013; van Leeuwen & Mashuri, 2012).

Finally, all Southeast Asian countries, except for Thailand, share a common fate stemming from colonialism imposed by Western powers. This history may breed feelings of social injustice as implicated in social resentments and a sense

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of low status, defeat, and powerlessness among Southeast Asians in their relations with outgroups that are perceived to be of higher status and power (e.g., the West, Jewish people). Considering that relative ingroup deprivation can trigger conspiratorial beliefs (Bilewicz et al., 2013), it comes as no surprise that anti-West (e.g., Mashuri et al., 2016a, 2016b), anti-Jewish (Swami, 2012; Swami et al., 2020), and anti-Chinese conspiracy theories (Putra, 2016a) are also found in Southeast Asia.

To summarize, there are a variety of political issues in Southeast Asia, be they domestic or regional, that deserve research attention. However, even as Southeast Asians comprise approximately 8.5% of the world's population ("Population of Asia", 2022), research on the peoples of the subregion is underrepresented in the social and political psychology literature (Bernardo et al., 2022). As an attempt to help overcome this underrepresentation, this special thematic section compiles empirical research employing samples of Southeast Asians to showcase socio-political issues that are of high relevance in the subregion. In what follows, we briefly describe the contextual background and main findings of each of the published papers in this special thematic section.

Overview of the Published Papers

This special thematic section includes five empirical papers. Three of the papers explore political issues in Indonesia. The Philippines provides the national setting of the other two papers. The main topics of the empirical papers revolve around domestic political issues, ranging from problematic majority-minority relations to corruption.

Islam and Politics

The first paper by Istiqomah et al. (2022, this section) examines the multiplicity of political attitudes of Muslims in Indonesia. In 1998, the Indonesian people witnessed the fall of an authoritarian regime (Singh, 2016). Since then, Indonesia has upheld democracy by dislodging the political role of the military. Under the democratic political system, the Pandora's box of Muslims' aspiration in Indonesia to articulate their Islamic identity in politics has been opened (Barton, 2002). Indeed, religion is considered important in Indonesia, the most populous Muslim-majority country in the world (Laksana & Wood, 2019).

A quantitative survey conducted by Istiqomah et al. (2022, this section) explored some political issues that draw a great deal of interest among Muslims in Indonesia. Such issues encompass anti-Western policies (i.e., the government ban on alcoholic beverages, nightclubs, and LGBT rights), the inclusion of religion in politics (e.g., the Indonesian president should be Muslim, support for a religiously-based constitution and the death sentence for religious blasphemers), and socialism (e.g., the limits for foreign investments and the reduction of inequality between the rich and the poor). The results revealed that, based on their political attitudes, Muslims in Indonesia can be grouped into six classes: fundamentalist Muslim, nationalist Muslim, apolitical Muslim, Hijrah Muslim, moderate Muslim, and progressive Muslim. Fundamentalist Muslims, relative to nationalist, apolitical, Hijrah, moderate, and progressive Muslims, score high in anti-Western policies, the inclusion of religion in politics, and socialism. The findings demonstrate that fundamentalist Muslims, compared to the other classes, express higher levels of totalism in Islam (i.e., the desire to establish Islam in all aspects of society), social dominance orientation, right-wing authoritarianism, and need for cognitive closure. This research provides new insights into multifaceted political attitudes among Muslims in Indonesia and points to psychological factors that can explain their differences.

State Media and Terrorist Labeling

In recent history, authoritarian regimes have dominated political life in Southeast Asian countries such as Myanmar, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Brunei. As strong-person rule clamps up on its citizenry, free media is muted by various political strategies such as the arrests of journalists, tax evasion charges, and closures of television stations. Alongside the silencing of free media arises more powerful state media, licensed to construct news reports in the service of an authoritarian state.

Research by Montiel et al. (2022, this section), using a mixed method integrating computational network analytics with a qualitative analysis, demonstrates how Philippine state media discursively escalated the government's linguistic aggression against anti-state forces. With the Philippine News Agency (PNA) reports as its data source, the research employed computational text analytics to compare PNA discourse during peace talks and after negotiations broke down between these two conflicting political groups. The analytical procedure identified networks of words and meanings that emerged over several months following the collapse of the peace summit. Results show how state media discourse changed across time, mirroring conflict escalation in the political arena. During peace talks, PNA reports deployed conciliatory words and raised a few contentious topics. After negotiations failed, PNA reports used more hostile words and expanded its narrative to include a larger scope of social issues. Interestingly, state media changed its label of the government's enemy, from rebel to terrorist, during conflict escalation.

The utilization of narrative expansion and terrorist labelling are pinpointed as two discursive strategies used by state media to escalate the war of words against anti-state forces. This paper contributes significantly to the literature on conflict by empirically demonstrating the role of language in the process of large-scale social escalation.

Violence Against a Minority Group

One common vulnerability for the region with its religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity is friction and conflict between groups. Often in Southeast Asia, collective violence and atrocities occur with the majority group as the perpetrator targeting minority groups. Thus, a challenge in almost all Southeast Asian countries has been how to manage ethnoreligious tensions and prevent intergroup violence.

Himawan et al. (2022, this special section) took up this issue, focusing on collective violence against minorities in Indonesia. More specifically, the study raises the issue of persecution of Chinese Indonesians. As a nation-state, Indonesia was established from the unity of different ethnicities and languages and using the Indonesian language (i.e., the original root of the Malay language) as the official (unifying) language. On paper, all Indonesian citizens are treated equally and have the same rights. *De facto*, however, implementing equal rights is always a challenge (Putra et al., 2022). It is, indeed, the case with Chinese Indonesians who have suffered from hate crimes and social exclusions in almost all of Indonesia's regions (Betrand, 2004; Putra et al., 2021b).

The May 1998 riot (involving looting, sexual violence, arson, murder, persecution, and lynching) was one of the major incidents targeting specifically the Chinese people in several cities in Indonesia. The collapse of the Indonesian economy in 1997 triggered civil unrest and led in 1998 to the overthrow of the regime of Soeharto, who had ruled Indonesia for 32 years and scapegoated the Chinese Indonesians. The May 1998 riots is one of the unacknowledged past transgressions in Indonesia, which has caused psychological trauma among the Chinese (Ahmadi, 2021).

Given that formal records describing the cause, perpetrators, and victims of the May 1998 riot are absent, Himawan et al. (2022, this section) were interested in understanding Indonesian civilians' perceptions of the tragedy. Using a mixed-method of qualitative and quantitative approaches, the study collected data from the so-called Pribumi (i.e., Indigenous Indonesians) and Chinese Indonesian participants. The findings show that Chinese Indonesian participants (i.e., the victim group) tended to attribute the 1998 May riot to anti-Chinese prejudice, criminal motives of the perpetrators, and scapegoating of Chinese Indonesians by the government. These attributions suggest that the Chinese Indonesian participants thought that the perpetrators of the riot were contaminated by hate narratives about the Chinese. Conversely, the Pribumi participants (i.e., the perpetrator group) tended to attribute the riot to the financial crisis, anger at the government, and anger at the police. Likewise, because of financial problems and such anger, Pribumi participants perceived that the May 1998 riot was triggered by military provocation and that the Chinese were to blame because of the financial crisis. From these findings, it can be understood why the Indonesian government has not acknowledged the mass violence against the Chinese Indonesians in the riot or seriously investigated its causes and perpetrators.

Moralizing Extrajudicial Killings

Extrajudicial killings refer to deadly state-sponsored violence against individuals and groups marked as threats to political stability. Such liquidations operate outside the state's legal system and are not shackled by government legal

procedures (Creegan, 2013). The controlling power of extrajudicial killings has been unleashed in authoritarian Southeast Asian governments, in the name of fortifying social order. The history of extrajudicial killings as an instrument for preserving law and order in Southeast Asia can be traced back to postwar regimes such as those of Marcos in the Philippines (1965–86), Suharto in Indonesia (1967–98), and military juntas in Thailand (Pepinsky, 2017). Invoking the storyline of a violent crusade against dangerous drugs, Philippine President Duterte's six-year rule from 2016 to 2022 again foregrounded extrajudicial killings as a prime threat to political and individual wellbeing (Kenny & Holmes, 2020; Tusalem, 2019).

Ochoa and Ong (2022, this section) examined the different kinds of moral reasoning for extrajudicial killings. More specifically, the research looked at how the basis of harm is negotiated across varying stances for or against Duterte's drug war policy. The study involved in-depth interviews with 12 Filipino participants in their twenties. Supporters of the drug war justified extrajudicial killings by positioning the targets as agentic and guilty of their drug-related crimes, while police were described as vulnerable to harm and in need of self-defense. Critics of the killings claimed the reverse, describing the targets of the killings as vulnerable victims, and the police as culpably agentic of the shootings. The study contributes to the field of moral reasoning and political violence, showing that moral references are not always singular, even in apparently immoral phenomena such as extrajudicial killings.

Vote-Buying

Through a field experiment, Halida et al. (2022, this section) investigated the phenomenon of electoral corruption in Indonesia. In 2021, corruption in Indonesia ranked 96th among 180 countries surveyed by Transparency International ("Corruption Perceptions Index 2021 for Indonesia", 2022). Electoral corruption in Indonesia can be partially traced to political patronage through which the ruling elites use their resources to reward voters for their electoral support (Dick & Mulholland, 2016). As one pattern of electoral corruption, vote-buying remains rampant in Indonesia (Muhtadi, 2019). Yet despite its prevalence, social psychological research that looks into the impact of vote-buying on voters' decisions is relatively unexplored within the Indonesian context.

Halida et al. (2022, this section) contributes to filling this research gap. They found that participants voted for a political candidate who offered more money than a political candidate who offered less money. This effect, as expected, was more pronounced among participants with low inhibitory self-control. However, the political candidate quality did not significantly determine the extent to which the amount of money offered by a vote-buyer candidate affected participants' voting decisions. The final finding revealed that more money induced higher levels of acceptance of the money, which in turn motivated participants to opt for the vote-buyer candidate. Taken together, the empirical findings in this research highlight the role of individual differences in shaping voters' responses to vote-buying.

Missing Points and Recommendations

Psychological research published in reputable journals, which are mostly written in English, is currently suffering from cultural biases, in part to due to the oversampling of WEIRD populations. This domination by a narrow, disproportionate sample of human variation questions the generalisability of fundamental psychological principles once they are moved to non-WEIRD cultures (Tindle, 2021). More social psychological research recruiting samples beyond WEIRD countries is hence sorely needed, which is beneficial for the advancement of psychological science (Forscher et al., 2021; Silan et al., 2021). Against this backdrop, this special section has aimed to facilitate the publication of social psychological research in an English language journal that scrutinizes localized political life in Southeast Asia.

As put forward above, the five papers published in this special thematic section investigate a variety of political problems, all of which speak about domestic or within-country issues in Southeast Asia. Our collection, however, misses out on the more macro interstate or regional political issues such as migration crises and territorial disputes, which are highly relevant in the Southeast Asian context as well. Further, authors in this special thematic section are from Indonesia and the Philippines, while contributors from other Southeast Asian countries, including Timor Leste, Brunei Darussalam, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar, are not represented.

However, we argue that the topics in this section adequately represent political issues in Southeast Asia. For example, the integration of religion and politics (see Istiqomah et al., 2022, this section) and vote-buying in electoral contestation (see Halida et al., 2022, this section) are issues of high relevance in most Southeast Asian countries (Ahmed, 2014; Hedman & Ufen, 2010). However, due to the submission time limits, this special thematic section did not cover all of the timely socio-political issues in Southeast Asia. One example is the Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi's denial of the accusation by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in December 2019 that the Myanmar government has perpetrated genocide against Rohingya Muslims (Putra et al., 2021a). Another example is the civil collective protests against a coup d'état by the Myanmar military regime in February 2021 (Putra & Shadiqi, 2022).

Despite these gaps, this special thematic section contributes to the dissemination of social psychological work on political issues in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, Southeast Asian psychologists still need to conduct more research and disseminate their findings. One reason is that, as Quayle et al. (2020) found, among 1151 authors who published their work in the journal *Political Psychology* between 1985 and 2014, authors from non-WEIRD countries were extremely rare. Moreover, to reduce the sampling bias, applying WEIRD research findings in non-WEIRD contexts becomes a growing need in psychological research (Brady et al., 2018; Newson et al., 2021). To achieve these goals, perhaps social and political psychologists from Southeast Asia can find ways to support themselves and other regional colleagues in publishing more of their intellectual work. One potential strategy is international research collaboration. This strategy may take shape via collaboration between Southeast Asian scholars and scholars from WEIRD countries in writing research proposals for grants from international funding agencies or their universities (de Baessa, 2008). However, we need to be careful about power relations in global research collaborations (Montiel, 2018). Neither party should dominate the research relationship, to maintain trust and commitment to the research project. With dominance in check, global research collaboration turns feasible and beneficial for both Southeast Asian and WEIRD scholars.

Conclusion

To make its research findings more generalisable to the human population, psychological science needs to reduce the lack of culturally heterogeneous samples. This special thematic section aimed to help overcome this problem, by facilitating Southeast Asian scholars to publish their work on the psychological perspectives of Southeast Asian peoples in responding to some political issues in the subregion. The issues that are featured in this special thematic section are varied, ranging from religion and politics, terrorism, tense majority-minority relations, to vote-buying. Altogether, this special thematic section addresses the importance of enhancing the representativeness of research samples, and hopefully contributes to a better understanding of political psychology in Southeast Asia.

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