

# Earlier Origins, Protracted Journey: local, regional and global pathways to independence

Review >  
Southeast Asia

Decolonization in Southeast Asia unfolded unevenly, a vector of social, economic and political stimuli. In *The Transformation of Southeast Asia: International Perspectives on Decolonization*, Asian, European and American scholars have produced a readable, informative and stimulating book. Sensitive to local and world politics, none indulge in romanticised nationalist hagiography or globalist cheerleading.

By Vincent K. Pollard

The book is divided into four main sections. Conceptually, most chapters hinge on one or more of five editorial claims made in the introduction. First, decolonization 'began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries'. Second, decolonization 'did not end with the formal transfer of power in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s.' And as a reminder of the limits to legal formalism, nominally independent Thailand's borders and territory were squeezed by French and British imperialism in the nineteenth century, and later by Japan during World War II (pp. 27, 113, 214). Third, both 'endogenous and exogenous forces influenced' the entire course of decolonization. Fourth, these forces accelerated the seizure of power by nationalist movements 'in Burma, Indonesia and Vietnam' from European colonisers weakened militarily and economically by World War II. Fifth, far more than the UK, the Netherlands or France between 1945 and 1965, the U.S. shaped Southeast Asia's decolonization to its advantage (pp. viii-ix).

The second assertion needs qualification, however. Even formal transfers of power to former colonies did not end in the 1960s. The time frame for the devolution of sovereignty should be extended by three decades – from 1965 for the Republic of Singapore to 1984 for Brunei Darussalam and to 1999 for Timor Leste. Later, East Timor is mentioned in passing (pp. 112 and 123).

## Dimensions of decolonization

Extending the arguments made in the introduction and setting the stage for the rest of the book, Paul H. Kratoska distinguishes among related decolonization processes. Kratoska claims that just as 'Southeast Asian decolonization unfolded over a long period of time, the relinquishment of European power also resulted from multiple factors' (p. 3). Jost Dülffer argues that Japan's invasion of China helped to preserve the beleaguered Communist Party of China from annihilation by the *Guomindang* (Nationalist Party). Not altogether new, the claim suggests alternate possible pathways to independence in Southeast Asia. In any case, Japan's invasion weakened the imperial powers, particularly, Britain, France and the Netherlands. In contrast, the U.S. emerged as a major player, and Portugal persisted for three more decades until Indonesia invaded Timor Leste in 1975. By defeating the colonial powers, Japan psychologically disabused colonised peoples of any notion of Caucasian invulnerability.

Attainment of political sovereignty was not matched by economic independence, however. J. Thomas Lindblad compares efforts at economic orientation by Malaya and its successor-state,

Malaysia, with the Philippines and Indonesia. Lindblad addresses the 'economic challenges, economic policies, investment climate and actual development of foreign capital commitments' of the three newly independent countries (p. 48).

## Indochina and Indonesia

Introducing the second unit, Bruce M. Lockhart discusses decolonization in Indochina (Chapters 4-6). Hugues Tertrais traces decolonization before, during and after the First Indochina War (1946-1954) in Tonkin, Annam, Cochin

and led the *Partai Rakyat Brunei* (People's Party of Brunei) revolt in December 1962. With Azahari's uprising quickly suppressed, the Sultan of Brunei refused to join Malaysia. Thus, Brunei's oil field revenues were denied to the expanded aggregation of former British colonies. Meanwhile, in 1962 and 1963, President Diosdado Macapagal's assertion of a longstanding dormant claim to Sabah (North Borneo) promoted yet another vision of decolonization. In 1963, Macapagal's efforts forced a postponement of the formation of Malaysia

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China, Laos and Cambodia. Marc Frey looks at the Indonesian revolution and the fall of the Dutch empire. He shows how suppression of a communist revolt by Republic of Indonesia forces certified Sukarno's reliability, and gave the U.S. the opportunity to withdraw support from the Dutch.

## British colonies

The third unit (Chapters 7-11) discusses decolonization of British colonies. Karl Hack calls for a new model to synthesize the competing 'imperial, globalization, colonial records, radical, counterinsurgency, diplomatic and nationalist' approaches (p. 121). Nicholas Tarling examines British inspired anti-communism and inter-governmental 'Asian cooperation', emphasizing British attempts to limit U.S. influence in Asia. Tan Tai Yong discusses the role of British policy and local politics in the creation of Malaysia from Malaya, North Borneo, Sarawak and (temporarily) Singapore in the period 1955-1961.

Since the chapter ranges a decade beyond its title's time frame, Yong might have mentioned Sheik A. M. Aza-

hari who opposed the proposed Malaysia and led the *Partai Rakyat Brunei* (People's Party of Brunei) revolt in December 1962. With Azahari's uprising quickly suppressed, the Sultan of Brunei refused to join Malaysia. Thus, Brunei's oil field revenues were denied to the expanded aggregation of former British colonies. Meanwhile, in 1962 and 1963, President Diosdado Macapagal's assertion of a longstanding dormant claim to Sabah (North Borneo) promoted yet another vision of decolonization. In 1963, Macapagal's efforts forced a postponement of the formation of Malaysia

by two and a half weeks. Yet Macapagal missed a chance to advocate a different road to decolonization for Sabah – independence from Britain, Malaysia and the Philippines. As of late 2004, none of Macapagal's successors have withdrawn the claim. In a fascinating microhistory of Malaya, Kumar Ramakrishna revises a historiography that insufficiently differentiated among the status, roles and activities of Chinese in rural Malaya during the twelve-year Emergency (1948-1960). Albert Lau reveals the contingency of constructed nationalism in the decolonization of Singapore. In the end, reluctance and rejection by Malay leaders became a driving force for decolonization in Singapore.

## American involvement

In the fourth unit, Mark Philip Bradley reconsiders the American vision of post-colonial Vietnam. Robert J. McMahon discusses the role of the U.S. in Southeast Asia in the period 1945-1965. McMahon documents the racism that undercut the United States' ostensible commitment to freedom for colonised

peoples in Southeast Asia. Ronald W. Pruessen examines the shifting criteria invoked by the U.S. Department of State for supporting social movements for national independence – and encouraging them to acquiesce in *Pax Americana*. Pruessen comments, in 'John Foster Dulles's perception of the United States as the predominant manager' (p. 236), the French and Dutch were not adroit enough in shaping decolonization.

## The politics of regionalism

In the post-World War II era, the ideology of regionalism cloaked the formation of anticommunist, intergovernmental Asian organisations with the fiction that they were apolitical and independent from outside influence. Kai Dreisbach surpasses promotionalist celebration of the origins of regional intergovernmental organisations in Southeast Asia. Earlier accounts of the inception of ASEAN by journalists and political scientists tended to accept promotionalist ASEAN historiography at face value and rarely considered evidence exposing covert U.S. advocacy of its formation (for example, Gordon 1963). Presenting an additional challenge to hagiographers, ASEAN's name and acronym were proposed four years before its establishment in 1967 by an American political scientist (Fifield 1963:425-426). Formed in late 1966, the South East Asian Association for Regional Cooperation shed its SEAARC acronym (pronounced 'shark'), reinventing itself more euphoniouly as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Manila Times Staff 1967:1). ASEAN strengthened anticommunist nationalist elites, complementing U.S. objectives. Although Dreisbach correctly states that newly elected President Marcos 'immediately tried to ease tensions with Malaysia' (p. 254), Marcos quickly lost enthusiasm. Reversing course within less than two years, he had commandos training to infiltrate Sabah. Indeed, according to a longtime political associate interviewed by this reviewer, Marcos was said to irritate Malaysian officials (Pollard 2004:40-42). Overall, Dreisbach's chapter is a jewel.

During the Cold War, Asian nationalists advocating decolonization chose among competing visions and strate-

gies for modernization. Agriculture and especially paddy production were crucial battlegrounds. Nick Cullather examines political, economic and technical developments driving genetically modified agriculture in Southeast Asia. While previous literature emphasizes American input, Cullather includes local elites. The introduction to this interesting chapter might have made explicit its thematic links to earlier parts of the book.

Wang Gungwu's 'Afterword: The Limits of Decolonization' briefly reflects on previous chapters. Lacking an alphabetized reference list of works cited in sixty-five densely packed pages of endnotes, the book has a helpful index. The volume will inspire other multi-level studies of decolonization and enhance reading lists in social and international history, comparative politics and political economy. <

- Marc Frey, Ronald W. Pruessen, and Tai Yong Tan, eds., 2003. *The Transformation of Southeast Asia: International Perspectives on Decolonization*. Armonk, New York and London: M. E. Sharpe. Endnotes, index. Paper ISBN 0-0-7656-1140-6

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