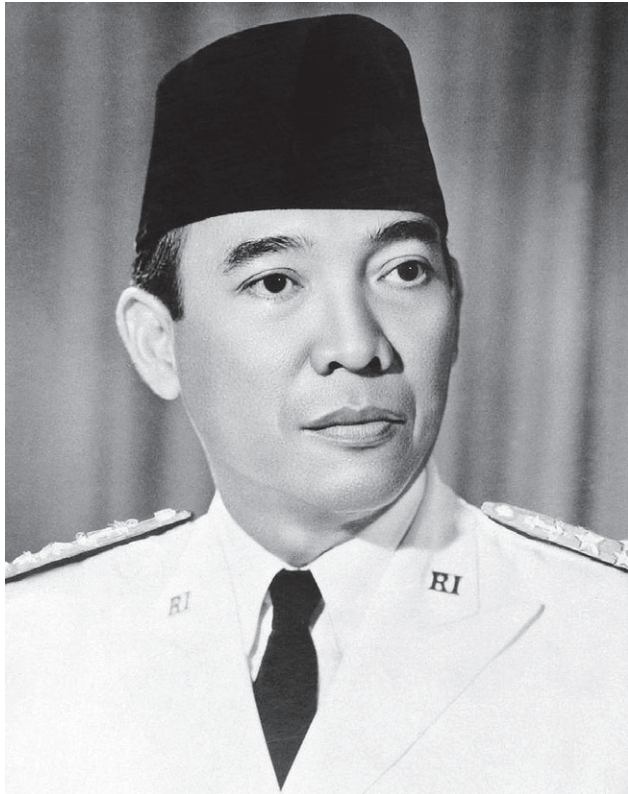


Trees for the wood



Populism in Asia is a publication of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Kyoto University. It comprises a lucid Introduction by the editors (respectively Director of said Center and the Chair of the Political Economy Centre at Chulalongkorn University), six contributions by Japanese scholars on populism in Latin America, Thailand, the Gorontalo Province of Indonesia, and Northeast Asia (Korea, Taiwan, Japan). The further chapters on populism in the Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia have been written by local scholars. The collection closes with a 4-page Afterword by Ben Anderson. Of the 173 pages devoted to country case studies, 70 focus on the Thaksin-Shinawatra phenomenon – and one would have liked to see that saga extended into the present to get a better feel for the populist mobilisation potential.

Niels Mulder

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Populism

Whereas the notion of populism has a relatively long history to describe leadership in Latin America, its use to label such in Asia does not predate the 1997 crisis that upset economies and popular expectations. All of a sudden, traditional elites were no longer able to deliver and so created room for doubt, discontent, and leaders who circumvented the established political order.

The newness of the term doesn't mean that populist leadership is new to Asia. If we trace the political career of Indonesia's first president, Sukarno, we can only conclude that he was an archetypal populist, speaking in name of the hardworking simple people (*Marhaen*) and listening to their message of suffering (*Ampera*). Their progress was obstructed by foreign

interests, which created room for the indispensable enemy and the spirit of nationalism cum xenophobia. Once in power, he foresaw a corporatist state through organising the so-called functional groups (*golongan karya*) and emasculating the party-based parliament. Gradually, he became the unquestioned, authoritarian leader necessary to streamline diversity as to his whims. Like Quezon of the Philippines in his heyday, Sukarno embodied both nation and state.

It may be surmised that, as a child of his day, he consciously or unconsciously emulated the 20th-century populist *par excellence*, Adolf Hitler, who took his inspiration from, and who manipulated, *die gesunde Volksempfindung*, "the healthy sentiment of the ordinary people". In parallel with Hitler, Sukarno raised national pride and xenophobia, but, in contrast, failed to deliver on his message of the suffering people (*rakyat*).

Listening to and responding to popular sentiments and felt needs, business tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra built a strong rural base of electoral support, especially in the North-East. Through redistributive policies and running the country as his enterprise, he alienated the established oligarchy that, through a military coup, ousted him in the second year of his second term as prime minister. Even so, when elections were held again, his proxy, political survivor Samak Suntaravej won the prime-minister-ship until he too – on a flimsy pretext – was unseated by the reaction under Abhisit ('Privilege' (*sic*)) Vejjajiva. Despite redistributive policies and after two years of confrontation by the red-shirted supporters of Thaksin, the conservatives were solidly defeated in the June 2011 election. It brought another proxy of exiled Thaksin to head the government, his sister and the first Thai lady premier, Yingluck Shinawatra. In other words, whereas the Thaksin discussed in *Populism* was overthrown in 2006 – so confirming the general short-lived-ness of populist leaders – he is still very much alive and kicking.

In various combinations we see the component factors of populism at work in the rise and undoing of politicians as far apart as Mahathir Mohamad (Malaysia), Joseph 'Erap' Estrada (the Philippines), Jun'ichiro Koizumi (Japan), Roo Moo-hyun (South Korea), Chen Shiu-bian (Taiwan), and businessman-politician Fadel Muhammad (Gorontalo, Indonesia). Each of these political personalities is coloured by his own style in variegated environments, resulting in a whole bouquet of populisms. Even so, through stretching the notion to include Estrada is to get beyond the bounds of the idea and unnecessarily obscures the wood for the trees.

Any vote-hungry politician worth his salt will appeal to the crowd. Megawati did it as the daughter of Sukarno; Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was shown listening to fishermen, labourers and farmers; all shake hands, project concern, and cuddle babies. This doesn't make them 'populist'. The only thing that was 'populist' about 'Erap' Estrada was his campaign slogan *Erap sa mga mahirap*, 'Erap for the Poor'. He had little to offer in the form of programmes, policies, plans or ideas. He didn't need these. He banked on his immense popularity as a movie hero with a Robin-Hood image and on the appeal of his macho lifestyle (openly womanising, gambling, boozing) that set him apart from the out-of-reach oligarchs. He was felt to be 'one of us' that people unthinkingly equated with his movie roles. In brief, he was popular, a popularity that flowed from the common man up to him. As far as he himself was concerned, politics was business, first of all for himself, secondly for his cronies. Even after his fall, because of gross abuse of office and blatant incompetence as a president, nine years later he still garnered over 26% of the vote, which is, such as in the enduring appeal of Thaksin as a hero of the underclass, the real thing to explain.

The collection conveys the impression that populism is a quality of certain political personalities who 'commune' with 'the people'. I think the concept to be more encompassing and even less specific than the bouquet of individual trees we are presented with. In the eventful 1970s in Thailand, the internal security people were behind a plethora of gangs and vigilante groups whose ruffianism was sanctified in the defence of

a nation under attack by 'communists'. More respectable were the Village Scouts whose loyalty could be activated through appealing to the mystique of Nation-Religion-King; based on 'the people' as an undifferentiated nation, the Scouts passed over class and political divisions, with the demonised Reds – 'scum of the earth' – as their adversary.

Other, more persistent populist movements may arise in the name of anti-colonial or anti-dictatorial demands that the powers-that-be respond to with suppression. Through annihilating organised class-consciousness and foreclosing its political channels, Suharto, in spite of his distrust of it, mobilised the populist appeal of Islam. In the course of his relative success as the Father of Development, the Islamic petty bourgeoisie felt increasingly marginalised and ambitiously responded. This movement toward Islamic populism – Islam as the palliative to worldly woe – did not centre on overall leaders, in the same way as politicised Islam did not in the days of Islamic political awakening (Sarekat Islam, 1912). And didn't comparable factors – Islamic groundswell temporarily even in coalition with the Leftist underground – spell the undoing of the Shah and currently roll through the whole of the Arab world, from the Maghreb up to Yemen and the Gulf? Consequently, it is fair to talk about the populist mobilisation potential that can be activated through appeals to nationalism, religion, and especially the inequities of power and wealth.

In Asia

On the western tip of the immense Eurasian continent and in America, we find Institutes of Asian Studies. In view of the distance from where their action presumably is, the label is appropriate, even as, generally, the Islamic parts in the southwest of the vast expanse are excluded. Be this as it may, I feel uneasy with the spate of books that relate about abortion, gender, populism, and other things in Asia. Few are the people who will accept my answer as to where I live as 'in Asia'.

When we consider the three examples, the abortion volume is almost entirely concerned with South-East Asia, and so are the gendered inequalities. Granted, both books hold some about the Subcontinent, but does that justify 'in Asia'? The same may be asked about populism, as it is restricted to Latin-American, and South-East and North-East Asian leaders.

In my generation, we developed the idea of South-East Asian Studies and found that there are enough commonalities among the populations along its littoral to roughly consider South-East Asia a culture area next to the sinicised region to its north, the Sub-continental civilisation to its west, and the far-western Islamic Middle East. Even so, since it has become fashionable to frown on area studies, calls have been made to widen the scope of comparison. In itself, there is nothing against that procedure, and with a chapter on Latin-American populism, the book we discussed added a valuable dimension in theorising the subject far beyond Asia!

Everything between the Negev and Kamchatka is Asian, and so the label 'in Asia' does not evoke more than 'boats float' if we want to discuss trans-Atlantic shipping. So, even if the publications originate from Institutes of Asian Studies, I think it reasonable to expect some more specificity as to what is treated where. If Asia is merely justified by adding a loose chapter on the subject in an unrelated place, the reader is put on the wrong foot. On the other hand, if that chapter is explicitly placed in a comparative cultural perspective, we may learn something of interest, and so we might if the comparison deepens our practical or theoretical understanding of the subject under discussion.

Niels Mulder has retired to the southern slope of the mystically potent Mt. Banáhaw, Philippines, where he stays in touch through (niels_mulder201935@yahoo.com.ph)

Notes

1 Referring here to Mulder's reviews of Whittaker, A (ed). 2010. *Abortion in Asia: local dilemmas, global politics*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books; and Rydstrom, H (ed). 2010. *Gendered inequalities in Asia: configuring, contesting and recognizing women and men*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press. These reviews, and more, can be found on www.newasiabooks.org

Above: Indonesia's first president, Sukarno.

Far right: Jun'ichiro Koizumi (Japan).

Below: Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Photo © World economic Forum.

