

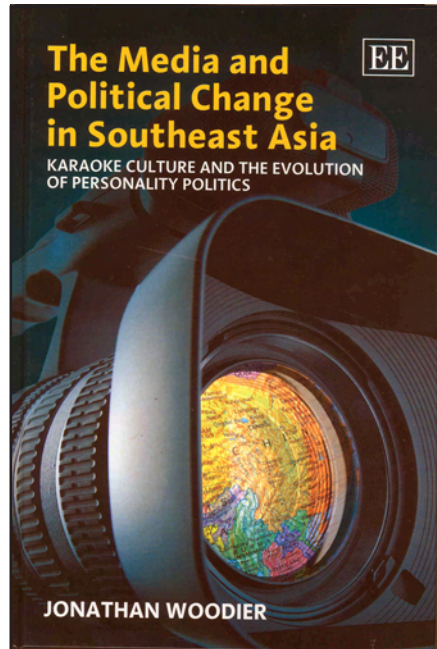
Noted

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The politics of media control in Southeast Asia

The Media and Political Change in Southeast Asia, by Jonathan Woodier. Cheltenham, UK: Elgar, 2008, 368 pp. ISBN 9781848441781

SOUTHEAST ASIA is constituted by relatively new states where the processes of nation formation and renegotiating of cultural identity in the post-colonial context attracts a lot of attention from social scientists, and this results in a growing number of interesting publications on various aspects of social, political and cultural life of the region. Yet, Jonathan Woodier's new book stands out not only as a well-crafted, nuanced, and very informative book about the relations between media and political changes in Southeast Asia, but as a book that challenges our perceptions of the democratising character of the media in this region. Hence,



Woodier addresses the question of media management in the South Asian region that has not been adequately explained previously.

In the centre of analysis there are five major developed states of Southeast Asia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines. The media analysis in each country highlights the specific characteristics, not just of the media itself, but provides the reader with fascinating insights into the political and cultural life of these countries. The Singaporean 'case' focuses on the dilemma faced by the Singaporean government between promoting regional attrac-

tiveness that should include certain element of liberalism with 'a sophisticated approach to securing access to the media space' (p. 21). On the other hand, in the Philippines public obsessions with celebrity culture resulted in the absence of meaningful democratic pluralism as political figures act more as entertainers than reformists moving the country towards liberalism and democracy.

Woodier also reminds his readers about the diversity of political, economic and all other aspects of life in the region that occasionally can be neglected by Western scholars. In Woodier's view the region has its own history that is highlighted throughout the book. He analyses the development of media in the region not only through the prism of the 9/11 terrorist attacks but also the impact of the Asian Financial crisis of 1997-98, which was equally important for the region. In every case study of a country he discusses the effects of the crisis on media development.

The second and third chapters of the book include an excellent theoretical analysis of a history of the mass communication media and the development of the media and entertainment media. Conceptualising media discourse provides the framework for chapters four, five, six, seven and eight. Chapter nine focuses

on the development of the perception industries and the power of persuasion in the Asian media. Chapter ten provided an analysis of the role of PR in the region.

Woodier suggests that the question about the liberalising role of the media, and the globalised media in particular, is more complicated than it may initially be perceived (p. 297). It logically follows from all of the case studies that the state or different states in Southeast Asia do their best in terms of crafting their 'innovative ways to maintain their control policies' (p. 297). However, he recognises that 'the use of the information technology superhighway is not a one-way street, cordoned off by the state and major corporation' (p. 301).

Woodier's book opens many debates including the appearance of new technologies in the region and the new ways that these technologies continue to challenge the existing relations between the media and the state in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.