(Any researcher or student in this study field immediately would think of such terms as “One China, One Taiwan,” or “One China, Two systems.”) Shimizu argues that this unique pause for one beat is indeed the space that the ROC or Taiwan has struggled to develop. She insightfully explains that Taiwan’s unending space-creating efforts have essentially realized the sustainable status quo. It is interesting to find that this unique diplomatic wisdom and technique of activating the “middle ground,” a pause for one beat, were most remarkably seen and developed in the dual history of Japan–ROC and Japan–Taiwan relations.²

Shimizu’s original argument regarding the “reproduction of status quo” should be tested with a closer examination of Lee Deng-hui period, which is beyond the book’s scope. The sequel of the book, therefore, is highly anticipated.

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https://doi.org/10.1080/24761028.2022.2071095

21-Seiki Tonan Ajia no Kyoken Seiji: “Sutoronguman” Jidai no Torai [21st century authoritarian politics in Southeast Asia: the arrival of the “strongman” era], by Ayako Toyama, Wataru Kusaka, Tsukasa Iga, and Ken Miichi, Tokyo, Akashi Shoten, 2018, 257 pp., JPY 2,860 (including tax) (paperback), ISBN 978-4-750-34663-2¹

In recent years, powerful political leaders have emerged in various parts of the world. While such leaders were previously the exclusive features of authoritarian regimes, we have witnessed more and more cases of democratically elected political leaders taking destructive actions to democracy. Notably, the former president of the United States, Donald Trump, has attracted the greatest attention, but the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan or Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orban can also be seen as such examples.

²For deeper understanding, it is recommended to compare the books on Japan’s China policy, PRC’s foreign policy, and international trends on China’s sovereignty issues. Inoue, Nicchu Kokko Seijyouka no Seiji Shi [Political history of Sino-Japan normalization]; Fukuda, Chugoku Gaiko to Taiwan-“Hitotsu no Chugoku” gensoku no kigen [Chinese Diplomacy and Taiwan-Origin of “One China” principle]; and Hirakawa, Futatsu no Chugoku to Nihon Hoshiki- Gaiko Jirenma Kaiketu no Kigen to Oyou [Two Chinas and “Japanese Formula” - Origin and application of solution to diplomatic dilemma].
In this context, this edited volume published in 2018 specifically focuses on political leaders in Southeast Asia, namely 1) the former prime minister of Thailand, Thaksin Shinawatra; 2) the incumbent president of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte; 3) the former prime minister of Malaysia, Najib Razak; and 4) the incumbent president of Indonesia, Joko Widodo. The editor, Ayako Toyama, defines them as “a political leader with new types of power bases and assertive governing styles” and calls them the “strongman” (pp. 8–9). The purpose of this volume is to address such questions as why these “strongman” have emerged, how they have gained and maintained their power bases, and how their emergence has affected democracy in each countries.

In the introductory chapter, Toyama begins with contrasting the “developmental state model” that emerged during the Cold War with the “strongman-style politics” in the 21st century in Southeast Asia, and describes the characteristics of the latter as “a strongman seizes political power based on voters’ dissatisfaction with vested interests, and while advocating‘democracy’ and ‘justice’, it forces voters to accept its coercive rules” (p. 20). While the leaders with the “developmental state model” during the Cold War period seized power via coups d’état or political upheavals and then implemented authoritarian governance, the “strongman” of the 21st century take control of power through democratic process – elections – and conduct authoritarian politics backed by public supports.

The following four chapters analyze specific cases of the four selected countries. Chapter 2 (Akiko Toyama) discusses Thaksin in Thailand, where the conflict between pro- and anti-Thaksin factions has caused flip-flops of elections and military coups since Thaksin’s prime-ministership in 2001. According to Toyama, the political conflict over Thaksin is neither a conflict over policy preferences nor a conflict over social class, but was created by Thaksin’s populism. His populism was initially used only as an electoral and political strategy, but was strengthened to fend off criticism by traditional elites, intensifying social conflicts and driving Thai’s parliamentary politics to collapse.

Chapter 3 (Wataru Kusaka) analyzes Duterte in the Philippines. In the 2016 presidential election, Duterte won public support across various social classes by calling for “discipline” to fight against drugs abuse, crime, and corruption while Duterte’s war on drug has been marred by frequent arrests and extrajudicial killings of suspects. It is notable that although most of the suspects are from the lower class, Duterte has still enjoyed strong support from that class. Kusaka points to the transformation of “moral politics” in the Philippines as the major reason for this phenomenon, arguing that Duterte has tended to avoid issues that divide the social strata, and emerged to win cross-class support by creating a contrast between the “good citizens” who oppose corruption and the “bad citizens” who are steeped in crime.

Chapter 4 (Tsukasa Iga) focuses on Najib in Malaysia, who became the prime minister in 2009, after the 2008 general election when the ruling National Front coalition suffered a major setback. Because of the setback, Najib pushed for reforms to liberalize the political and economic spheres in the beginning. In 2015, however, due to the reports of his involvement in a massive political scandal which drew criticism not only from the opposition parties but also from within the administration, Najib rejected ministers and bureaucrats who were critical of him from within the government in order to maintain his power. Iga attributes Najib’s authoritarian governance to the concentration of power in the prime minister and the fragmentation of opposition parties. Accordingly, the prime minister is institutionally in the position to exert strong controls over the government and the party in the Malaysian political system. He also points out that the opposition parties, which are supposed to be forces of resistance, have been divided by the ruling party’s manipulations and have not been able to mobilize necessary resources to overthrow Najib’s administration.
Finally, Chapter 5 (Ken Miichi) discusses Jokowi in Indonesia. In the 2014 presidential election, Indonesian voters expected Joko to promote reforms as an “outsider,” who was supposed to be different from previous political leaders. Yet, according to Miichi, Joko is neither a populist nor hostile to the existing elites, but rather skillfully manipulate personnel to elicit cooperation from the existing elites while maintaining his image as a “non-elite” as a means of sustaining his popularity among the public. In this process, Joko has not hesitated to use coercive measures. In particular, when Islamic forces mobilized the masses to sway the Joko administration in advance of the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, Joko’s authoritarian governance style became conspicuous, as he used forceful ways to designate Islamic leaders for police investigation and to disband radical groups through aggressive legal procedures.

Three of the four countries analyzed in this volume, with the exception of Malaysia, achieved democratization after the mid-1980s. However, as this volume points out, these three countries are already experiencing the democratic regression. For example, the Freedom House index cited in Chapter 1 downgraded the status of Thailand and the Philippines from the “free” to the “partly free” since 2005, and Indonesia since 2013. So far, there has been no previous attempt to systematically analyze such democratic fluctuations in Southeast Asian countries by using an innovative common framework. In this sense, this volume should be a pioneering work that aims to explain the recent political changes in Southeast Asia with an organized comparative perspective. The descriptive analyses on each case study stand on empirical research by the respective authors, and is solidly grounded. For readers interested in Southeast Asian politics, this volume will serve as a useful introduction to understanding the politics of each Southeast Asian nation in comparison with its neighbors.

That said, there is remaining questions as to whether the volume succeeds in its aim of explaining the democratic backsliding in these selected four countries by the factor of “strongman.” To begin with, the definition of “strongman” itself remains ambiguous, meaning no more than “a political leader who rules with authoritarian governing styles.” In addition, while the four political leaders selected in the volume are certainly attached with “strongman” images, the introduction has not closely examined whether or not they are really the “strongman,” who are shaking up democracy. It is left to each chapter how to determine the nature of the “strongman” and how its rule is initiated and maintained. Due to the lack of analyses of commonalities or differences in the selected leaders (if any) as well as the origins of such factors, this volume has not been successful to provide a clear view of similarities and differences among these four countries for the readers.

Furthermore, even in specific cases, more close examinations on the evaluation of “strongman” would be necessary. For example, it should be explained why Thaksin was unable to contain his opposition and even invited the military to intervene despite his repeated electoral victories. If he was really the “strongman,” would he not have been able to suppress the opposition by force, bring the judiciary under his control, and even seize control of the military? As for Najib, although they happened after the publication of this volume, he was eventually not only ousted from his position after the opposition coalition’s victory in the May 2018 general election, but even arrested by the local investigators on corruption charges in October 2018. How can the “strongman” be defeated in an election that is legitimate in the democratic procedures? Actually, the author of Chapter 4 does not regard Najib as a “strongman” because he points out that Najib’s “strongman” political approach is derived from the institutional arrangement of Malaysia’s political system, where power is concentrated in the hands of the prime minister. In other words, in the case of Malaysia, the obstacles to democracy are institutional, not a “strongman” characteristic of Najib.
It is also inappropriate to draw a conclusion that Joko is the “strongman” from the analysis in Chapter 5. Although Joko implemented some dangerous governance practices that could undermine the rule of law, the characteristics of Joko’s politics that are evident from the analysis seem to be his crafty political style in bringing even opponents into his camp and skills in procuring public support. It might be true that the policies related resource nationalism movement and the illegal fishing control appealed to nationalism as a way of getting public support, but Joko has not necessarily used coercive authoritarian governing styles in these cases.

Rather, what emerges from the analysis in these chapters is the importance of structural factors that have set back democracy in each country. Although whether or not Thaksin is a populist requires a more rigorous examination, Chapter 2 attributes the collapse of Thai democracy to Thaksin’s populism. However, it would be common that political leaders use populist discourse to gain political support. Rather, the question for Thai democracy should be why the attacks on Thaksin have persisted in such an uncompromising manner and why the anti-Thaksin forces were driven to the point where they even accept the collapse of democracy in exchange for Thaksin’s ouster. Considering this question, the factor of conflict between social strata, of which Toyama denied the relevance, seems to be an important element. From the reviewer’s perspective, an examination of why class conflict caused the collapse of democracy might be necessary.

Regarding Indonesia, the threat to democracy seems stemming from not Joko’s authoritarian political approach, but rather the rise of radical Islamic forces, which is analyzed in the second half of Chapter 5. As a matter of fact, Joko’s authoritarian governance actually concentrates on how to deal with this Islamic extremism. If that is the case, then it might be necessary to explore the background and reasons of the rising political significance of Islam in Indonesia. Why did Joko try to suppress them with his authoritarian political methods? How will this affect democracy in Indonesia? A more analysis on structural changes of Indonesia must help answering these questions.

In this sense, Chapter 3’s analysis of the Philippines provides a fascinating perspective as it captures the emergence of Duterte in the context of structural change. Duterte probably fits the image of “strongman” best among the four political leaders. However, rather than trivializing Duterte’s popularity to his own political methods, Kusaka argues the impact of the “moral discourse” that has emerged under the expansion of political participation and neoliberal economic growth since democratization. The challenges of democratization and greater political participation, economic growth and widening inequality, and the lack of rule of law, including widespread corruption, are problems common to other Southeast Asian countries. I believe those structural factors may provide some hints for better understanding the regression of democracy in Southeast Asian countries.

Notes

1. This book review is a revised version based on the original work in Japanese, K. Kawamura, “A. Toyama, W. Kusaka, T. Iga, and K. Miichi hencho ‘21-seiki Tonan Ajia no kyoken seiji: ‘sutoronguman’ jidai no torai,’” Tonan ajia kenkyu, Vol. 57, No. 1 (2019): 101–103.

2. See Shigetomi, “Seiji sanka no kakudai to minshushugi no hokai: tai ni okeru minshuka undo no kiketsu,” 45–70.
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https://doi.org/10.1080/24761028.2022.2078089