

Book Review

Participation without democracy: Containing conflict in Southeast Asia

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Participation without democracy: Containing conflict in Southeast Asia

Author: Garry Rodan

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In *Participation Without Democracy*, Garry Rodan argues that, when responding to the dynamics and contradictions inherent to capitalist development, regimes—representing coalitions of interests and the ruling/dominant political elites—'invent' ways to contain conflicts with societal entities (i.e., opposition parties, civil societies, labour unions) in a way that mitigates political harm.

This argument is based on two propositions. First, the development of capitalism has caused inequality to deepen. Both ruling politico-economic elites and marginal groups find that the inequality and disruption inherent in capitalism creates political challenges, which, as a consequence, demands mitigation strategies. Second, established coalitions of interests handle political dissent by moving beyond binary scenarios, rather than simply opening political participation or applying coercive

means (crackdowns, arrests, etc.). While elites design institutions of participation and representation as a means of domesticating dissent and conflict, marginal groups may reject them or use these channels to reach beyond being co-opted. Opposition parties, radical NGOs, and marginal groups all seek to utilise such institutions for their transformative agendas. In short, ruling elites and marginal groups engage in participating institutions with different goals in mind.

With these two propositions, Rodan introduces the Modes of Participation (MOPs) framework. MOPs resonate with the interests of the ruling elites, embodied in representation and participation institutions. Because power struggles produce winners and losers, MOPs inevitably tend to be "*privileging, marginalizing, or excluding particular interests or conflicts from political processes*" (p. 28).

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Rodan's MOP framework indicates that, while literature on capitalism and democracy is abundant, its direction is not linearly. Although some regimes eventually exhibit certain authoritarian characters, Rodan argues that we must avoid overemphasising why these "hybrid regimes" do not possess certain democratic features, but rather understand what those regimes actually do. As readers will see in the three cases he discusses—Singapore, the Philippines, and Malaysia—dynamic conflicts of interest have resulted, for instance, in the decisions among the oligarchs in the Philippines to expand participation through the Party-List System. It was in the interest of the family dynasties that dominated mainstream parties to show their goodwill by setting a 20% quota for marginal groups to canalize political participation among them, including those who could become insurgents or mobilise collective movements.

In short, Rodan asserts that MOPs have been strategically adopted by regimes in Singapore, the Philippines, and Malaysia to contain potential opponents by channelling them into manageable sites while simultaneously fragmenting their collective power potential. Rodan rightly cites Schattschneider: "He who determines what politics is about runs the country, because the definition of the alternatives is the choice of conflicts, and the choice of conflicts allocates power" (p. 66 as quoted in Rodan, p. 23). For Rodan, "the way institutions shape the exploitation, use, and suppression of specific conflicts is fundamental to political strategy" (p. 23).

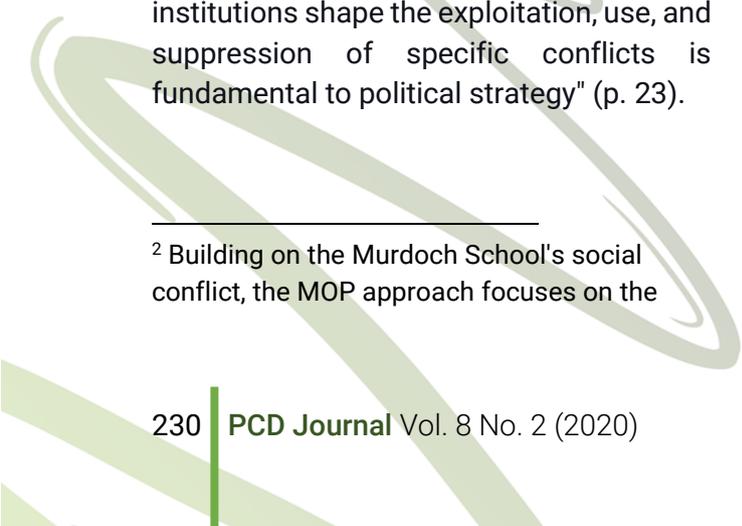
² Building on the Murdoch School's social conflict, the MOP approach focuses on the

MOPs have two components. First is the ideology of participation: the Philippines' *populist* (accentuating a straight people–leader nexus with the expense of "the curtailment of political pluralism and tendencies toward authoritarianism," p. 30), Malaysia's *particularist* ("emphasizing the right to representation of discrete communities and identities based on ethnicity, race, religion, geography, gender, and culture," p. 32) and Singapore's *consultative ideology* (problem-solving and technocratic oriented participation at the expense of depoliticisation).

Second are the institutional modes of participation. The ruling elites incorporate societal entities in state affairs to channel, contain, and control political pressure and fragmentise civil society movements. *Participation Without Democracy* focuses on the combination of (1) the sites of participation, including the state, the trans-state sponsored, and the autonomous; (2) two levels of inclusions, i.e. individual and collective (p. 34).

Rodan's strengths are his synthesis, which involves a clear yet straightforward nexus between the interest-based, institutional, and ideational arguments. In short, he implies that the ideological and institutional mechanisms of these modes of participation originate from the interest coalitions that exist among the ruling elites. Both ideas and institutions are created to 'mitigate' the conflicts inherent within capitalism and development (i.e., labour's concerns with industrial relations and general welfare).² This line of argument has

"struggles over who can participate in political decision-making, how and on what basis, as



a rationalist flavour, viewing ideas and institutions as instruments for serving the ruling elites' interests.

In his explanation, Rodan presents an in-depth causal analysis as well as a detailed description of entities/actors in their contexts. For example, when discussing the fragmenting effects of bottom-up budgeting among the MOPs of the Philippines, Rodan examines what regimes "*actually do*" (p. 5). The introduction of participatory budgeting seems to have enabled the state to open some decisions to other social entities, from which the liberal and moderate can benefit and through which they can pursue their goals. Rodan also covers the dynamics within civil society, mapping the current and diverging ideological and strategic choices among liberal, radical, and revolutionary civil society as well as their contrasting coalitions. He explores civil society groups' internal and constructed views on participatory budgeting to understand how, for instance, radical decisions are made to handle participation and "restrain patronage politics", to "temper the market", and to cultivate and consolidate the poor and marginalized both within and without the state (p. 159). This also supports Rodan's position that the three modes of participation—regardless of their original function to serve the ruling elites—also offer oppositional entities the opportunity to achieve their own goals.

Another illustration of MOPs at works is the Singapore case, through which

the principal issue at stake in both democratic and authoritarian regimes" (Rodan & Baker, 2020). Further application of this social conflict approach in topics such as extractive industries, agrarian relations, gender, labor

Rodan convincingly shows how the consultative ideology works. As the leftist movement was destroyed by the regime in the 1960s, the technocratic elites within the People's Action Party enjoyed political ascendancy. As capitalism's development started to produce inequality and subsequently dissent among the opposition, the regime introduced two MOPs to contain conflict. In 1990, it introduced the nominated members of parliament (NMP) system, intended to obviate "the formation of alliances among independent organizations and/or with opposition parties" (p. 91). Five years beforehand, the techno-PAP regime had also introduced feedback units: Reaching Everyone for Active Citizenry@Home (REACH) and the Our Singapore Conversation (OSC). Despite the various means and ways offered by these feedback channels, the regime's nature of engagement has remained highly controlled. Consultations are tightly monitored, and what can and cannot be discussed is determined by the government. Indeed, attendance is invitation only; it is not open to everyone. While NMP is intended to stop the rise of potential collective movements, the feedback units (REACH and OSC) are aimed at individualising citizen engagement with the state.

The last case is the particularist ideology of representation in Malaysia, illustrated by Rodan through two MOPs: the National Economic Consultative Councils (1989–1990 and 1999–2000) and

migration, environmental degradation, and aid's political economy is elaborated in Carol, Hameiri, and Jones (Eds) (2020).

the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Gabungan Philihantaya Bersih dan Adil, Bersih) movement. NECC was state-sponsored, while Bersih was autonomously initiated by civil society and opposition parties. However, due to the dominant ideology of *particularist* representation, both failed. For example, the NECC was designed to mitigate any detrimental effects from the 1972 National Economic Policy. For many the NEP had entrenched Malaysia's affirmative policy that benefited the ethnic Malays, and thus the NECC was adopted out of recognition of Malaysia's diversified economy; it was thought a means of channelling grievances within and without the ruling party coalition. The NECC was designed as a consultative forum, whose orientation is technocratic.

Nevertheless, NECC was a failure. Unexpectedly, consultations began wildly questioning the regime's race-based economic development policy, hence threatening its very foundation. The NECC case validates Rodan's argument that, although this MOP was designed to serve the interests of the regime, marginal groups were nonetheless able to utilise it strategically to pursue their goals. As for the Bersih Coalition, it too failed; particularist ideologies fragmented the CSOs and opposition parties, and as such their collective goal could not be realised.

Examination of three participation ideologies, their practice, and the level of inclusion in Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines shows the book's other strength: its ability to examine the historical institutional trajectories through which the politico-economic interests of the ruling elites are embedded in the development of capitalism, and thus respond and adapt to dissatisfaction with its effects. Looking to

the author's curriculum vitae, it is evident that *Participation Without Democracy* is based on an accumulated and saturated understanding of capitalism's development, regime development, and the nature of state–society relations in Southeast Asia in general, and in the three countries discussed in particular.

Reading *Participation Without Democracy* reminds us that repression can be used to constrain an already fragmented population, as shown in the case of Burma (Callahan, 2004) and as reflected in Antlov's (2003) discussion of the legacy of consensus (*mufakat*) and harmony as norms in political contestation.

Callahan's discussion on the Burma case illustrates that the use of extreme ideologies, citizens-as-enemies, and repression mechanisms to not only minimise but also violently eliminate power contestation against the state. *Participation Without Democracy* reminds us that the anti-democratic mode of participation is not always manifested through the extreme restriction and repression of political dissidents or the denial of election results; at times, it may include civil society, or even—as in Singapore (p. 91–92)—provide space for critical voices for the sake of the regime's credibility. If *Participation Without Democracy* had discussed Burma, perhaps it would argue that the junta should have 'learned' to be politicians—as New Order Indonesia had done previously—so that it could better constrain and control political contestation by diverting it into controllable avenues.

In the case of decentralized Indonesia, Antlov (2004) discusses the proliferation of citizen involvement in the early years of decentralisation both within

state institutions and avenues initiated by civil society. In terms of ideology, Antlov asserts that New Order's 'anti-politics' legacy continued to constrain political contestation in newly opened participation spaces, either *invited spaces* or *popular avenues* (Cornwall, 2004). The political elites promote harmony and consensus (*mufakat*) as noble things while framing political dissent and contestation as not part of Indonesian tradition. Antlov also reminds us of the danger of these newly opened participation spaces' apolitical nature, which have provided traditional power-holders with new ways to access power. As such, his analysis—initiated two years after decentralisation began in Indonesia—warned us that "[We] need to look closely at who is involved in village council and citizens' forum meetings, at who controls the agenda, how decisions are reached, and who benefits from the decisions that are made" (p. 84).

Despite the strengths of *Participation Without Democracy*, several topics can be expanded. First, the book implies that the interests of the ruling elites are relatively stable. It is worth exploring historical moments and critical junctures in which ruling elites may be uncertain about their interests (Blyth, 2002). At such moments, they may seek and adopt new ideas (ideology) from which they craft new institutions to serve their interests better.

Secondly, from policy feedback theory (Mettler and SoRelle, 2018), it is

interesting to research the effect of MOPs on citizens. What have they learned? How does such learning affect their view of political elites, political institutions, the state, and politics in general? To what extent do those experiences and lessons affect their future political participation, not just in relation to the existing MOPs but in a broader sense? Using an interpretive approach to understand how citizens achieve understanding, interpretation, and consciousness, they decide how they should engage in state affairs.

Finally, the same approach is also useful for understanding MOPs hosted by entities other than the state, including corporations. Many have argued that, to mitigate surrounding communities' grievances regarding social and environmental injuries, corporations—especially extractive industries—have adopted various participatory modes of development planning under the umbrella of corporate social responsibility. Similar questions, such as whose interest are served, which community members are invited, which subjects are discussed, how issues are discussed, and so forth, are all valuable for understanding how power is exercised on platforms that have been promoted as 'democratic'. The MOP framework, thus, can help reveal the political impact caused by profitmaking entities (Edi, 2020).

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