

# Party Capitalism in Southeast Asia – Democracy's Bane?

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## Abstract

The lecture will broadly review the progress of democratization in Southeast Asia. Going beyond Huntington's generalizations about democracy's Third Wave, it will adduce empirical evidence to show a strong orientation and lively appetite for democracy among Southeast Asian citizens and even political elites. This seems to have occurred in tandem with the great economic strides in the region, notwithstanding the 1997-98 economic meltdown. Arguably, the institutionalization of democratic processes within state and civil society is evident in many Southeast Asian states although there may have been democratic impasses or reversals from time to time. The argument presented is that there is no necessary or automatic correspondence between democratization and economic growth, or its corollary, modernization. Political history, political culture, ethnic strife, and social contexts of particular social formations, are the overarching and 'over-determining' factors. This said, the lecture posits that one major factor, 'party capitalism', has put a brake on democratization. Broadly defined as the involvement in business on the part of political parties and political elites, party capitalism has surfaced or even taken root in the political order of some Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand and is responsible for both the emergence of 'money politics' and new hegemonic business-party alliances. The lecture also explores how the phenomenon of party capitalism may itself spark a new wave of democratization and the further politicization of civil society.