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**(Un)making Southeast Asia's illiberal order:  
Anti-geopolitics and the authoritarian turn**

Convenor:

Dr Sabina Lawreniuk

Royal Holloway, University of London

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**PANEL ABSTRACT**

The 'disturbing phenomenon' of 'illiberal democracy' (Zakaria 1997:42) – where nominal elections are held but the rule of law is to a greater or lesser extent suspended – is on the rise, not just in Southeast Asia but across the globe. From Poland to the Philippines, Brazil to Burma, the broad international sweep of these trends (e.g. Hangmann and Reyntjens 2016; Gonzales 2016; Chang, Zhu and Pak 2007) has provoked suggestions both within the academic literature and popular discourse that we are now witnessing a 'global authoritarian turn' (Handel and Dayan 2017).

The scale of this shift is certainly troublesome and warrants careful scrutiny of more general antecedents. Nevertheless, the globalist language that has come to pervade the debate is unhelpful, presenting a totalising reading of authoritarian expansion as a process of top-down and often North-South diffusion. In this reading, the influence of local geographies, histories and people for ushering, provoking, and refusing the trajectory of authoritarian change is erased.

In defiance of this eviscerating imaginary, this panel welcomes contributions that tell alternative stories of the authoritarian turn, situated in the struggles of the subaltern and their resistance to practices of illiberal statecraft. We invite critical reflections on the 'anti-geopolitics' of the authoritarian turn, drawing on Routledge's conceptualisation of counter-hegemonic skirmishes waged from outside the traditional positions and locations associated with geopolitics: that is, beyond sites of political, economic, and cultural power and prestige.

Indeed, beneath representations of Southeast as a subcontinent of smiles, yielding to the strictures of authoritarian control, is an inured history of rebellion from below. This history resonates today in the struggles of Cambodia's garment workers, Thai land rights activism, and Malaysian women's campaigns for political representation, among countless others; all waged in the face of state hostility or outright repression. This panel will examine these grassroots challenges, elaborating a 'geopolitics from below' that presents contemporary political change in Southeast Asia from the perspective of those engaged in resistance to the authoritarian state.

**Single session**

Email: [Sabina.Lawreniuk@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:Sabina.Lawreniuk@rhul.ac.uk)