

De-naturalizing the patron-client paradigm – on the shifts, limitations and decentering of patron-client relations in Southeast Asian politics

Standard panel:

Since decolonization, social science has largely read Southeast Asian politics and polities through the lens of what James Scott (1972) calls patron-client politics. There can be little doubt as to the important contribution of this concept to unpacking the hierarchical relations that suffuse crucial operations of state power and political distributions in the region. Despite the popularity of this analytical schema in Southeast Asian studies, this Panel seeks to question its undifferentiated applicability and theoretical unity across both different sites and historical periods of Southeast Asia. Many authors have attended to the intimacies and structures of Southeast Asian politics in other terms such as theater (Geertz 1981), prestige (Walker 2002), mandalas (Tambiah 1977) or spiritual potency (Anderson 1990) but patron-client relations remain analytic lens of choice to explain Southeast Asian politics. We ask what dynamics, valences and nuances of Southeast Asian politics become invisible through the analytics of patron-client politics and how we might bring them into view? How might we add nuance and particularity to understandings of Indonesian elections, Malaysian parliamentary fights, Myanmar's ongoing civil war, Philippine diaspora politics or Vietnamese labor migration/trafficking networks by eschewing the roman political language of clients and patrons in favor of new metaphors analytics? What might we learn from such efforts?

This panel invites contributions which examines Southeast Asian politics, from general elections all the way down to the local power relations of everyday life, in diverse ways and in contrast to prevailing paradigms of patron-client politics. We seek both theoretical work that critically discusses the intellectual features and limitations of patron-client politics and specific empirical efforts that broaden the repertoires and metaphors with which we can interrogate Southeast Asian politics. We invite papers from a broad variety of disciplines that expand our appreciation of Southeast Asian politics through analyses of, for example, state modernization, policy innovations, literary works, philosophical arguments, marginal political forms, historical sources or visual art.

Convenors:

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