Panel Proposal (Double Sessions)

Democratic 'Resilience' and Civic Space in the Pandemic Era: Competing Forces, Adaptation and Survival

Convenors:

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Background

Countries in the world, specifically Southeast Asia, have experienced various forms of 'crisis' such as the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic. This has led to portray forms of 'state behaviours', which significantly impact democracy and human rights practices. The crises have seemingly allowed the state to blatantly exercise power which has been used to directly disrupt democracy practices and corrode the promotion of human rights (Asia Centre, 2020).

During this pandemic, the Global State of Democracy 2021 clearly states that democracy is now at risk. Its survival is endangered by a perfect storm of threats, both from within and from a rising tide of authoritarianism. Sadly, the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated these threats by implementing state emergency, the spread of disinformation and crackdowns on independent media and freedom of expression where civic space is known to be shrinking and suppressed.

In other words, the pandemic has given stronger power to the state to suspend democratic activities, stifle political criticism, introduce intrusive movement tracking and data gathering applications imposed on individuals (Asia Centre, 2020). Covid-19 has also caused an impact across multiple dimensions of fragility under the so-called democratic system. The pandemic creates new fragilities and has also amplified existing tensions and vulnerabilities. (Harrison and Kristensen, 2021). Various terminologies have shown the backsliding of democracy in the macro context, such as democratic erosion or a decline of the democratic quality of democratic regression and set-back. Based on this ironic phenomenon, it has become the main reason why the theme of this panel is significantly essential to be discussed in this conference.

However, despite the bleak pictures of democracy, we cannot see existing forms of democracy 'practices' that have been impacted by Covid-19 as taken for granted or as something that is 'given'. By no means in any circumstances, there are contested or competing 'forces' with diverse self-interests, such as political elites, military apparatus, central and local government, regional interest, the business community, religious groups, NGOs and civil society organizations, which are all involved in shaping 'the resilience of democracy in its current form both in positive and negative ways.

Authoritarian governance, which emerged under such a democratic system, is an example of the by-product of 'weakening', polarisation, fragmented or even the 'defeat' of pro-democratic actors within these competing forces. These forces may operate in various areas such as politics, state policies and regulations, governance, development and the environment, economic cooperation, and collective identities (ethnic or religious-based). Due to such competing forces, democracy is progressively 'adapting and struggling to survive.

Objectives of the Panel

This panel will explore various forms of democratic 'practices' in Southeast Asia countries by considering the mapping and interplay of various and competing contested forces and how they are implicated in forming democracy 'practices' in the pandemic era. We will treat the studies presented in this panel as comparative or case studies. Amidst this endeavour, we also want to understand innovation and local practices of democracy that may emerge for a lesson learned and best practices. Accordingly, it deploys a non-binary course of actions within the local elites, CSOs and grassroots groups and how they have sought to respond to various vested interests. We also want to be critical in exploring different practices of democracy: to question how real is democracy is or is it just a myth due to elite capture or hijack by specific actors, for example? What is the connection between democracy and people's welfare or economic development? Finally, this panel contributes significantly to enriching the discourse and body of knowledge of democracy to improve policy prescriptions.

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Reference

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