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Book Review

A Review of ‘Human Insecurities in Southeast Asia’

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Human Insecurities in Southeast Asia

Paul J. Carnegie, Victor T. King, Zawawi Ibrahim (Editors)

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Debates on human insecurities are crucial in a changing world that witnesses high social inequality, degradation of environment, social tensions and a growing violation of human rights. Unfortunately, all these issues permeate the social structures of Southeast Asian countries in different ways. In that region civil society faces problems that are diverse, as seen in the political tensions in Thailand, the deterritorialization of indigenous peoples in Philippines and Malaysia, human rights violations in Myanmar, and numerous other challenges. Such setting demands different approaches from institutions and communities to overcome pending risks threatening their populations.

With this scenario in mind, the book edited by Paul J. Carnegie, Victor T. King, Zawawi Ibrahim (respectively, Professors at University of South Pacific, Fiji, and the two latter from Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Brunei) provides a broad analysis of the specificities of human insecurities in Southeast Asia. Moreover, the manuscript develops a comprehensive multilevel view on the challenges and risks towards a just society in that region. The book comprises the main works presented at an ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) inter-university seminar held in Brunei Darussalam in December 2012.

The book is divided in eleven chapters and a conclusion, covering all Southeast Asian countries, as well as the role of ASEAN in promoting human security in the region. The Introduction (also Chapter 1) provides a literature review of the human security concept, as well as acknowledging its complexity and limitations. Authored by the editors, chapter 1 also delivers a broad overview of Southeast Asia’s challenges in a multidisciplinary approach. Moreover, they

also summarize the importance of the topic when they point out that “the juxtaposition of fantastic wealth generation against the ubiquitous and pervasive banality of poverty and vulnerability in Southeast Asia is what renders ‘human insecurities’ simultaneously almost invisible but glaringly obvious” (p. 3).

Chapter 2 is a continuation of the conceptual discussion started in the Introduction, in which Victor King contributes a theoretical review on uncertainty, risk, security and trust offered by some classical works in the social sciences. While the human security concept is relatively new, its roots can be found in the works of eminent thinkers like E.P. Thompson, Zygmunt Bauman, Karl Marx and others. In some way, all of them discussed the human condition and insecurities of modernity—and post-modernity—that are the concern of Mahbub’ul Haq and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) who first addressed concepts of human security.

A very important issue discussed in two chapters of the book are human (in)securities of indigenous peoples in Southeast Asia. Specifically, chapter 3 authored by Zawawi Ibrahim brings a discussion about deterritorialization of the Orang Asli and the Penan in Malaysia. His study shows the importance of local specificities in human security analysis, as well as the impacts of deterritorialization on the level of culture—as seen in the song composed by a Orang Asli described on page 33. Moreover, his ethnography urges the reader to reflect on the link how between human security and debates in development. Similarly regarding the (in)security of indigenous peoples, chapter 11 by Eliseo Huesca Jr. shows the challenges caused by the expansion of agribusiness in Mindanao. Although the Philippine export trade has improved over the last few years due to the exportation of commodities, at the same time the exploration of rural areas has impacted negatively on the natural environment causing environmental degradation, poverty and social inequality. Furthermore, Huesca Jr’s investigation provides a clear picture of the pervasive effects of land grabbing, an issue affecting the Global South that often is a driver for poverty and inequality in rural areas worldwide.

Similarly to chapter 3, another important input grounded in ethnography is provided in chapter 6. Authored by A. Ullah, Y.M. Yusof-Koslowski and M. D’Aria, the chapter is well structured and offers a comprehensive examination of female migrants in Southeast Asia. Based on 94 interviews, this unique research focuses on three different phases of migration: premigration, enroute and postmigration. The unsafe experiences of migrants are illustrated in the sorrowful findings of the researchers. For example, interviews revealed that 63% of migrants were sexually abused enroute and 36% threatened by traffickers. Unfortunately these data do not differ from similar analyses of other regions, as can be seen from the flow of Latin Americans to the United States and Africans to Europe. A gap to be filled by future research could be comparing the findings of Ullah et. al. with results of these other regions. Most probably similar patterns can be found in this issue that weaken human security across the world.

Responses to cross-border terrorism and traditional security concerns are the topics of two other Chapters. Authored by Paul J. Carnegie, chapter 4 concerns the historical tension between Indonesian government and Islamic militants, mainly after the Bali terrorist attacks in 2002. In chapter 5, Gordon Carson analyses how the promotion of ‘national security’ by Malaysia does not necessarily facilitate human security on the coast of Sabah. Also applying ethnographic methodology, Carson’s contribution aims to grasp the challenges for human security due to the action of states and its security forces. His findings make the reader reflect on the difficulty of reaching some of the targets of Sustainable Development Goals (e.g., Objective 16—Peace and Justice and Strong Institutions) while the traditional concept of sovereignty remains strong.

Taking the analysis to the level of regional organizations, chapters 7 and 10 focus on the ASEAN’s attempt to accommodate the notion of human security. Differently from the other chapters that focused on local or state issues, Mikio Oishi discusses in chapter 7 the political spaces cre-

ated by ASEAN that facilitate a discussion of human rights. In Chapter 10, Ta-Wei Chu demonstrates how difficult is the process for ASEAN to become more people-oriented. Nevertheless the challenges described by Oishi and Chu, that state-centrism within ASEAN is no different from other regional organizations that are dealing with human insecurities, like the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). Here again it would be welcomed to read in the near future comparative analyses of regions that face similar challenges as currently experienced by Southeast Asia.

Finally, two other chapters offer important case studies from the Philippines and Thailand. In chapter 8 Rommel Curaming offers a historical perspective of the conflict in Muslim Mindanao, with special attention to the violence promoted by the state and colonial powers since the 16th century. Following that chapter, Nicham Singhaputargum analyses the civil society movements in Thailand, especially after 2001 with the rising of Thaksin Shinawatra. Both cases presented in those Chapters bring to attention the question of structural violence, a concept coined by sociologist Johan Galtung that refers to a situation in which the insecurity is embedded in the structure of the social system.

Some important issues could be covered more accurately in the book, such as the effects of the 1997 crisis, human trafficking and the effects of climate change (natural disasters). However, these shortcomings do not affect the quality of the analysis presented in this book. It presents a compelling overview of human insecurities in Southeast Asia, highlighted by the extensive use of ethnography and historical analysis. Surely, this is an important reading for academics and students concerned with the region and even useful for comparative analysis with other continents.

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