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# Introduction—Political Norms in Southeast Asia: Overlapping Registers and Shifting Practices

*Gabriel Facal, Elsa Lafaye de Micheaux,  
and Astrid Norén-Nilsson*

## INTRODUCTION

Political norms in Southeast Asia are undergoing major and rapid reconfigurations. This has been thrown into sharp relief in connection with recent global affairs, including responses to and engagements with the redefinition of power relations in the Indo-Pacific, the Covid-19 pandemic, civil war in Myanmar/Burma, and Russia's war in Ukraine. Even more readily manifest are these shifts in upheavals particular to the region, such as deepening authoritarianism across mainland Southeast Asia, and illiberalism in much of the archipelagic region.

The normative landscape in today's Southeast Asia is marked by a diversity of competing, but also intersecting and interpenetrating normative registers. Circulation of political norms between different and diverse parts of Southeast Asia, heterogeneous and connected—and with the world beyond, through the

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crossroads position of the region—has increased the porosity between normative regimes. The territorial differentiation that governments exercise within national spaces (Ong, 2002) also conditions interactions between a plurality of normative registers.

This Handbook aims to constitute a reference point on political norm dynamics in Southeast Asia, by bringing together an array of normative repertoires that frame the possibilities for citizens to participate in, make decisions, set agendas for, and contest not only electoral and institutional politics but also informal and imaginary political spaces. It seeks to shed light on intersecting political and social transformations and their consequences from the vantage point of political norms. While chapters in this Handbook lay out and analyse how political norms across Southeast Asia have been shaped in successive historical phases, the core of the Handbook is formed by the current dynamics involved in defining and transforming political norms.

### WHAT ARE POLITICAL NORMS?

The concept of norms is characterised by plasticity. This plasticity results from its wide range of meanings, rooted in the different ways in which a variety of social science disciplines have studied norms. Our starting-point is that this plasticity makes the concept useful for the study of contemporary Southeast Asia, given the region's heterogeneity in terms of regime types, political party trajectories, and daily lives of its governed and participatory populations.

Different research fields have approached norms employing considerably different definitions thereof. The legal norm is a set of prescriptions and prohibitions institutionally defined (Boudon & Bourricaud, 1982: 418). In law, both the law, as well as the rule of law, are norms. For economists, norms are institutions, whose definitions range from a set of rules considered as the rules of the game of the society (North, 1990), to the “codification of fundamental social relationships” (Boyer, 2022). Douglas North distinguished between norms and conventions (called “social structures”), which define informal incentives, and formal ones, referring to property rights. In the economic field, norms have been studied since the inception of economic institutionalism in the early 1900s. The norm assumes even greater significance in sociology and anthropology, where the concept refers to recurrent rules, constraining rules, or values and principles. Norms selectively control the development of aptitudes and preferences of members of society (Veblen, 2007 [1899]). In political science, norms are additionally interpreted as a set of international treaties and national rules.

As a consequence of this pluri-disciplinary embrace of norms, there are many approaches to studying them. Studies may focus on the legitimacy of norms, including who accepts a norm and under what conditions. Others may investigate their function, which may include reducing uncertainty; allowing action and coordination; or framing and naturalising existing social, political, and economic structures. Norms are also studied in terms of their diffusion

patterns and the circulation of normative models between social and geographical spaces. The question of how norms operate should not be treated in the abstract, but has to be related to structures of socialisation and the exercise of power (Macherey, 2014). The norm always “carries [...] a claim to power” (Foucault, 1999), and is intimately related to conflicts. Thus, its genesis is rooted in struggles of power: far from being linked only to *normality*, the fixed norms whose implementation is mechanical, it also features the modality of *normativity*, a dynamic of plasticity, enabling the contestation of established norms, and even the invention of new norms, these “vital patterns in search of the conditions of their realisation” (Macherey, 2009: 127). This paves the way for normative pluralism (Bruckert & Pannier, Chapter 2). Norms might also be loosely formalised and the concept of “practical norms” accounts for “the various implicit regulations (informal, de facto, tacit or latent) that underlie the practices of actors which diverge from explicit norms (official or social norms)” (Olivier de Sardan, 2021: 121). These practical norms are only rarely disconnected from ideas and values (Dumont, 1983). Finally, norms are both *descriptive* in that the norm captures what is normal, or in a statistical sense, what exhibits a normal distribution; and *prescriptive*, in that norms state or reiterate what has to be done, or what should be. In the book, chapters navigate between these two poles.

In this Handbook, scholars from different disciplinary and intellectual traditions are brought together so as to combine a variety of perspectives. As an overarching definition and common starting-point, we understand political norms as any set of rules, ways of acting, or habits of thought, which relate to the exercise of power, to the social and daily experience of being governed, of representing and participating in the polity, or of inventing alternatives. Political norms are socially defined and sanctioned and derive their legitimacy from their ability to be applied and to regulate. Produced by social struggles, by incumbent powers and authorities, or by the repetition and regularity of social and political facts, political norms might be codified (e.g. through the Constitution, rule of law, or electoral process) or not (e.g. as in the case of the “grammar” of social movements, religious symbolic forces, or patterns of corruption). They closely rely on, and are constantly reshaped by, competing political and ethical values which provide social actors with a set of common reference points and ideals. Since meaning is embedded in the common practices that shape the way we act and talk, political norms are necessarily related to “institutions of meaning” (Descombes, 2014) that are not only political, but also social, cultural and economic. Consequently, political norms are not reducible to a single principle and must be understood in their social and historical context.

We understand political norms to be elaborated in plural languages for different audiences. Intercultural and inter-class translations are handled by a range of intermediaries, facilitators, and mediators, whether they be individual agents or institutions. Taking on uncertainty and risk, these norm

brokers play the role of referees in arenas of negotiation, elaborating compromises, inventing solutions acceptable to all and finding practical arrangements, minimal convergences, and temporary accommodations. Brokers may manipulate impersonal and generic registers, such as the religious rules laid down in the Islamic sharia or the norms laid down by the Constitution. Local and interpersonal normative registers guarantee spaces for negotiation, allowing mediators to convert political, economic, religious, and social resources in a virtuous circle (Facal, 2021: 91–92).

The Handbook presents Southeast Asian cases at the crossroads of different normative regimes. Some norms have been introduced by national governments and incumbent power-holders, or are attached to more or less entrenched regimes linked to local political cultures of religious, customary, or clientelist types. Others yet are articulated in opposition or as alternatives to these. Others still reflect contemporary transnational exchanges, recently strongly marked by the rise of China. Normative registers carry their particular histories, including legacies of colonialism, and of the nation-building of the post-independence era. The book presents regional cases at the crossroads of these different normative regimes. Thus, it provides an at once comprehensive and in-depth understanding of contemporary political norm dynamics in Southeast Asia, which combines governance trends with underground developments that run through Southeast Asian political life. Taken together, the various cases demonstrate that these discrepancies are part of “institutions of meaning” that are political, but also social and cultural.

### WHY THE POLITICAL NORMS ANGLE?

The perspective of political norms, and their interpenetration, allows access to politics from different infra-, para-, or even extra-political angles. It reveals in-between political spaces, which are neither completely formal nor completely outside the state. Within these spaces, norms which condition legitimacies, licitness, and legality are re-produced. When different normative registers converge, they may reinforce the legitimacy of existing political arrangements and of legal enforcement. On the other hand, when they stand in contradiction with each other, they may undermine officially recognised political rights for segments of the population. Through their interaction, these registers define what is moral, ethical, and even legal. These political norms frame the possibilities for citizens to participate in, decide, represent, contest, and enforce collective action, not only in electoral politics but also in informal political spaces. Political norms shape social agents' behaviours, provide them with legitimacy or disqualify them, include and exclude, formalise and informalise. They are, in this sense, a force of social regulation, as Bruckert and Pannier demonstrate theoretically and empirically in this volume (Chapters 2 and 23). Their effects are neither general nor uniform: they respond to criteria of age, gender, social class, religion, regional identity, and political affinity, entailing inequality and exclusion but also protection and ways of escape.

Political norms may appear as instrumental tools for enacting “informal sovereignties”. Hansen and Stepputat (2006) use this concept to describe grey areas of political authority. For his part, Barker shows that these informal sovereignties are the product of a cultural idiom, which combines with market and state factors. While the latter tends to formalise informal sovereignties to better control them, the actors of these sovereignties find, on the contrary, an interest in reinforcing their informality in order to better seize the market (Barker, 2016: 186–188).

At the same time, a norms perspective also exposes the parallel existence of diverging meanings or interpretations of norms, sometimes referred to as norm polysemy. Linsenmaier et al. (2021) define ambiguity as a fundamental ontological feature of all norms. They identify four mechanisms through which social agents cope with the multiplicity of norm meanings in contemporary global governance: deliberation, adjudication, uni- or multilateral fixation attempts, and ad hoc enactment. We agree with the authors that “seeing ambiguity as an inherent feature of norms makes it possible to regard norm polysemy not just as a structural feature of international society, but also as a fundamental expression of the normative diversity of the world’s human communities” (Linsenmaier et al., 2021: 525). While some social agents may find an interest in reifying political norms, other agents try to reverse, abolish, or fluidify existing norms, create new ones, or even change the modalities of political norm production.

## CONTRIBUTION OF THE HANDBOOK

Political norms in Southeast Asia have been explored through several strands of literature. In the study of human rights in the region, accounts of norms within ASEAN from the late 1990s and early 2000s tended to take the constructivist position that norms are constitutive of identities and a driver of behaviour. Acharya, in a series of writings, interrogated the evolution of norms for intra-regional relations (Acharya, 2005), suggesting that they mattered in shaping Southeast Asia’s regional order, even when they contradicted national concerns and positions (Acharya, 2005). In this vein, scholars have examined normative debates on the road to creating an ASEAN human rights mechanism and how those mechanisms in turn solidified norms (Ciorciari, 2012). Other scholars challenged the constructivist claim that norms would reconstitute the behaviour of actors. Davies (2013) points out that while ASEAN member states have strategically adopted human rights references regionally, they have violated those same norms domestically. For Poole (2015), regional norms are primarily shaped by the desire to achieve external regional legitimacy. According to Chua, rights are not only their normative meanings found in legal instruments and documents but come to life through political processes (Chua, 2022).

In the study of domestic polities, a norms approach has been less common. Weiss (1999) assessed a shift in Malaysian political culture during Reformasi

through changing norms of political interaction, transformed by transnational influences and the proliferation of alternative media. Scholars have tended to bring to light fast-changing political norms in countries across the region through analytical lenses such as those of discourse or ideology. Writing in 2014, Rodan and Hughes argued that the Southeast Asian region was marked by changing patterns of political authority, conditioned by how industrialisation, globalisation, and the influx of international capital and aid, had weakened ruling elites' ideological supremacy and produced ideological contestation, with groups across different social classes adopting new moral ideological stances (Rodan & Hughes, 2014: 3–4).

This Handbook is timely in mobilising a political norms perspective to advance our understanding of today's Southeast Asia. In the current wave of autocratisation sweeping through the region and the world (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019), this wave has been accompanied by attempts to redraw boundaries of political action and participation by the dissemination of new political norms. Even as contemporary democratic backsliding generally takes place gradually through incumbents subverting democratic institutions while nominally adhering to the principles of democracy (Curato & Fossati, 2020), this backsliding is nonetheless typically accompanied by recast political norms, such as those of national unity and authenticity in Cambodia (Norén-Nilsson, 2022). On the other side of the barricades, alternative norms are articulated. An example is how the pro-democratic Thai youth protesters have built references for progressive change through constructing collective narratives (Sinpeng, 2021). These norms are transnational in character (Sastramidjaja, Chapter 29), championed also in neighbouring Myanmar by Gen Z youths who advocate an anti-authoritarian, anti-military regime, anti-China influence, anti-racist, and anti-sexist democratic movement (Jordt et al., 2021). Another set of transnational norms is attached to Chinese presence, investment and aid in Southeast Asia (Reilly, 2012; Frécon, Chapter 12).

This Handbook therefore aims to take stock of and to analyse a historical moment of intense contestation from a multitude of vantage points. It assembles the expertise of specialists of the region's politics and societies to critically interrogate the political norms landscape of Southeast Asia today. In gathering these assessments, this Handbook aims to make several contributions.

First, it identifies and provides insights into different key political norms and normative registers. This sheds new and significant light on weighty issues that are not commonly studied from this vantage point. The authors identify the complex processes of norm definition at work in the current context, that remain overlooked in scholarly literature. We highlight the norms advanced by bottom-up expressions of alternative politics, which are often missing in an otherwise vivid literature on civil society and citizenship in contemporary Southeast Asia.

Second, the Handbook probes the interaction between these normative registers, tracing clashes and intersections. This dimension is addressed in some individual chapters, and through the collective enterprise which brings

the findings into conversation with each other. Political norms are themselves complex and multifaceted. This sometimes reflects how they are religiously or culturally embedded; particularly in contexts where “politics as practice” retains a foothold over formal politics. These religious and cultural contexts then condition tensions engrained in norms of authority and the distribution of power. Political actors also bring together plural norm regimes, for example through the “Asian values” discourse (Thompson, Chapter 17), which reify a set of political norms. Ideologues may also mobilise supposedly vernacular values of thrift, diligence, hard work, and discipline which reconcile the free market with the socio-political interventionism of the state (Evers, 2004: 214).

Centralised regimes (e.g. Vietnam) favour the diffusion of monolithic models of normative system, while less centralised territorial spaces, archipelagic geographies and enclaves, encourage the coexistence of parallel political normativities and polysemic national norms (e.g. Burma, Indonesia). The postmodern consumption models of the emerging middle classes illustrate the evolving intersection and intermarriage of norms. The week-end outing to the mall has become a family activity that fits in with Islamic references to frugality and restraint in Brunei (Fanselow, Chapter 10), at the same time as online shopping not only responds to the individual’s shopping needs but also those of social affirmation through mechanisms of distinction and identification.

The precedence some norms take over others is in part influenced by intergenerational and gender relations. Seniority often legitimises a certain control over the maintenance, transmission, and dominance of some norms over others. This has to do with how seniority, not necessarily defined solely in terms of age but also in terms of individual behaviour and relative merit, presumes a closeness with history and memory that is intimately connected to authority. While it is difficult to generalise about gender relations in the region, politics was in many places until recently tendentially associated with masculinity, while femininity has played a role in defining structuring dimensions of politics, such as authority. The indefiniteness or polymorphism of gender can also be shown to infuse norms, not only in ideal terms but also concretely (Wieringa, Chapter 30).

Third, the Handbook interrogates the dynamics of political norms persistence and change. This is a salient issue during the current moment, marked by important norms shifts in the region without a clear benchmark (Lafaye de Micheaux, Chapter 3; interview with Froissart, Chapter 8), some of which are tied to the stagnation of democracy (Indonesia, Philippines), and authoritarian resilience and deepening (Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam). Looking at history, the deterioration of democratic norms anticipated democratic breakdowns (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Bünte, 2019). The ability of polities to maintain those norms, alternatively to steer norms change, is therefore of preeminent importance.

The personalised dimension of power, prevalent in much of the region, may be as much a vector of maintenance as of normative change. The reproduction



of elites (e.g. in Cambodia) may appear to indicate the durability of normative regimes, but also necessitates their evolution and reinvention. Norms change also stems from challenges to norms disseminated by national elites. Decentralisation in Indonesia from the 2000s onwards provided an opportunity for new regional leaders to mobilise regionalist, religious or ethnic referents as a counterweight to national-level nationalist or developmentalist narratives. Marginalised segments of populations, such as punks (see Kiss, Chapter 33), challenge norms of state control, such as those of propriety and politeness, through competing norms such as incivility. Alternative normativities sometimes give new life to norms, such as the values of solidarity and sharing that some punks claim to borrow from traditional archipelagic societies. Crises may also act as triggers for normative change. The heroes of the war in Timor-Leste are still at the heart of political processes in the country today (Feijó, Chapter 11). Numerous other factors, including demographic (the rate of ageing and urbanisation, see McCargo, Chapter 28) and technological ones (the use of digital media, see Khor, Chapter 7), play a significant role for norms persistence and/or change.

The explanatory power of the political norm for political outcomes is thus tied, and sometimes subordinated, to political, social, cultural, economic, or geopolitical factors. Even as strategic interests (Bruckert & Pannier, Chapter 2) can take precedence over norms, normative regimes constitute a pool from which ideas, values, and practices may be mobilised and instrumentalised by collectives that invest them with meaning.

## ORGANISATION OF THE HANDBOOK

In this volume, four dynamic spaces of norms articulation and transformation are explored. We first interrogate challenges to Southeast Asian politics and citizens stemming from transnational pressures, and the pertaining reconfiguration of political norms. National changes and transitions linked to new governmental orientations are then addressed. We thereafter move to question vernacular forces, from religious authorities to patronage politics, that contribute to the redefinition of political norms. Finally, we explore spaces that champion alternatives to the state, market, and development sectors' political norms.

The first section begins with an overview of recent historical developments that set the broader stage for political norms articulation. The region, which favoured multilateralism after the Cold War (Buszynski, 1992), has in recent years had to face the renewal of geopolitical polarity (Froissart, interviewed by Lafaye de Micheaux, Chapter 8). This is manifest in the emergence and consolidation of the Indo-Pacific concept, and in the tensions concomitant to the ambitious development strategy adopted by China in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Lafaye de Micheaux, 2020).

Against the backdrop of successive worldwide trends of liberalisation, globalisation, democratisation, and autocratisation, states in the region adapt

their constitutions, human rights provisions, and institutional architecture (Dressel & Bunte, 2017). Diplomatic agreements and development agendas impact on political norms through measures such as the establishment of international rights commissions, the setting up of supervisory bodies, and the ratification of treaties. Roughly two-thirds of the states have signed the most important human rights treaties until now (Lafaye de Micheaux, Chapter 3), and important advances have been made with the installation of an ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) and the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (Wahyuningrum interviewed by Andrieu & Facal, Chapter 9).

Although there is a tendency to see these transnational modes of governance as purely technocratic and in this sense “above politics”, they are inherently political, highly contested, and normatively ambiguous (Breslin & Nesadurai, 2020; Nguyen-Pochan, Chapter 5; Basri, interviewed by Peterson, Chapter 16). In embedding “moving sovereignties” (Pandolfi & Abélès, 2002: 7), corporate and development sectors also alter political norms (Scheer, Chapter 6). Their influence is based on the imposition of models for good development practice, sometimes through soteriological narratives (Rudnyckyj, 2010).

The second section investigates the transformation of political norms involved in the reorientation of governmental directions. Governments in Southeast Asia exhibit increasingly authoritarian tendencies, and several have steered their countries on a path of deepening authoritarianism in recent years. Of the eleven political regimes, only Timor-Leste is generally considered a liberal democracy. Here, democracy was installed in 2002, combining “elements of deep-rooted traditional political culture” with “modern forms of organising the running of the state”, which generated a complex set of arrangements. The plasticity of these arrangements enabled democratic progress, although there is now ground for fears of democratic backsliding (Feijó, Chapter 11).

Authoritarian resilience in the region is predicated on norms evolution and reinvention. In Brunei, the unsustainability of the rentier “Shellfare” state has exposed contradictions in the institution and ideology of the monarchy, prompting the state to increasingly rely on normative religion for its legitimisation (Fanselow, Chapter 10). In Laos, the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP) has pursued a twin-track approach of strong economic growth and state violence and oppression ever since 1975 to maintain its model for stability; yet, Sims (Chapter 13) argues, norms of development and stability require a rethinking so as to meet current governance challenges.

In accounting for democratic backsliding in the region, the rise of illiberal leaders has been given much focus. Yet, the link between these two phenomena may be more complex, as Curato and Presto (Chapter 14) caution with reference to the Philippines. Assessing the Presidency of Duterte, they argue that

the Filipino public supported Duterte “despite of, not because of, his democratic transgressions”, and outline a persisting tension between democratic and authoritarian fantasies.

The third section explores the role of vernacular institutions in norm redefinition. “Vernacular” highlights that these norms follow local grammars of power, with particular conceptions of society, citizenship, and public space. They include forces from above, such as kingship (de Vienne, Chapter 24; Prince Sisowath Thomico interviewed by Norén-Nilsson, Chapter 25); horizontal forces, such as religious actors (Arifianto, Chapter 20; Kent, Chapter 22); and grassroots forces (Inguanzo, Chapter 21). They also include militaries, that have different cultural-historical, including authoritarian, legacies, shaping military norms that continue to affect military roles (Chambers, Chapter 18). Sets of interwoven norms of economic acts tapping the “potent energies of the earth” also create different economic possibilities, which cloaked in utopian stories together constitute “the morality of exploitation” (Work, Chapter 19).

“Vernacular” does not imply unitary cultural values, as seen in the Asian Values debate which is best understood not as a discussion about “Asian” norms, but as “a dispute about the way in which the modern world should be constructed”, as argued by Thompson (Chapter 17). As an autocratic tool, this manifestation of “reactionary culturalism” has thus been countered by democratic oppositions in the region championing narratives of “vernacularised” liberalism.

The final section examines alternative definitions of political norms to the orthodoxies promoted by the state or vernacular institutions. The heterogeneity in state approaches to human rights produces varied and contested definitions of human rights and their connection to political rights (Usman Hamid, interviewed by Estrelita & Facal, Chapter 34). In shaping notions of civil society, citizenship, and public space, many Southeast Asian governments make efforts to decouple activism from “civil society” (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007: 783) so as to enable projects of rule. Yet, civil society in the region still effectively shapes norms contesting violations. Weiss & Hansson (Chapter 27) argue that democratic backsliding in Southeast Asia has not been accompanied by a shrinking civil society, but that on the contrary, civil society has expanded, “becoming denser and more visible”. They find that protest and activism in the region over the past two decades has profoundly reshaped norms “regarding who can participate in politics, when, how, and why”. Indeed, dissatisfaction with existing norms of governance may result in rethinking not just how to govern, but also what it is that needs to be governed (Breslin & Nesadurai, 2020: 198–199).

One characteristic of the recent wave of protest is the cross-fertilisation of protest issues, repertoires, and tactics. Sastramidjaja (Chapter 29) charts contemporary youth movements, characterising them as “rhizomatic”—referring to the heterogeneous assemblages they form “connecting nodes of youth activism in novel ways”. She finds that generational affinity empowers youth

not only to fight attempts at shrinking civic space, but also to reconfigure norms of democratic citizenship.

Such norms are also reconfigured beyond the streets of protest, by rural Indonesians, through the discourses they employ when making claims related to land conflicts (Berenschot, Dhiaulhaq & Saraswati, Chapter 31). Orthodoxies are also challenged by anarchists and punks (Kiss, Chapter 33) and by the LBT movement (Wieringa, Chapter 30). “Urbanised villagers”, voters with hybridised urban-rural identities, form a demographic group able to shift political agendas and resources in the region (McCargo, Chapter 28).

The contributions to this Handbook present regional cases at the crossroads of a plurality of normative regimes that fall into these four broad sections. By examining these normative registers in-depth, the Handbook seeks to shed light on the conditions of congruence and dissociation between them.

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