

## *State, Society, and Social Transformation: Rethinking Public Policies in Southeast Asia*

Southeast Asia is one of the regions experiencing the most rapid social, economic, and political transformation in recent decades. Relatively stable economic growth has driven infrastructure development, urbanisation, digitalisation, and increased regional cooperation through ASEAN. Meanwhile, the region has faced increasingly complex challenges, including rising social inequality, environmental degradation, shifting migration patterns, and evolving relations among states, communities, and global actors. These changes demonstrate that development can no longer be understood solely as increasing economic growth nor as a process of social transformation; instead, it has influenced how people live, interact, and participate in public life. To emphasise these conditions, development is a process of a governing system in conjunction with its empirical conditions; accordingly, philosophical thought determines the outcomes.

In such a situation, public policy plays a crucial role. Public policy is not simply a set of administrative rules but an instrument that shapes the relationship between the state and society. For decades, many countries in Southeast Asia have adopted a development approach oriented toward economic growth through investment, industrialisation, and infrastructure development. This approach has succeeded in increasing economic connectivity and productivity, but paradoxically, it has not always addressed the social problems that arise from these changes.

Social transformation is the change that occurs in social structures, values, and relationships as a result of economic, technological, political, and cultural developments. In Southeast Asia, this transformation is occurring rapidly due to the influence of globalisation and the increasing flow of international investment. Countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia are striving to increase their competitiveness through infrastructure development, industrial areas, and foreign investment. However, this development also presents new challenges. Rapid urbanisation increases the need for public transportation, leading to congestion and, in turn, community relocation and unequal access to public services. Furthermore, labour migration is changing the social composition of urban communities, giving rise to issues of cultural identity and social integration.

Subsequently, these changes demonstrate that countries no longer face sectoral issues. Transportation policy is linked to environmental policy; education is linked to migration; and economic development is closely linked to political stability and social sustainability. Therefore, public policy requires a more adaptive approach than the conventional bureaucratic model, which tends to be top-down.

Michel Foucault offers a different perspective on the state and public policy through the concept of governmentality. According to Foucault<sup>1</sup>, modern power is exercised not only through law or coercion, but also through various mechanisms that shape how individuals think and act. The state regulates society through education, health, statistics, regulations, and various policies that appear administrative in nature. In other words, public policy not only solves problems but also shapes societal behaviour. Foucault's approach helps us understand that the success of a policy is measured not only by physical development but also by the extent to which it can create sustainable behavioural change. In the Southeast Asian context, development is often understood as large-scale infrastructure projects, yet social change actually occurs through everyday practices influenced by government policies.

Investment is a key driver of development in the region. Countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand are competing to attract foreign investment to build infrastructure, strengthen manufacturing industries, and increase economic competitiveness. The construction of Vietnam's metro system, involving investment from China, Japan, and other countries, demonstrates that investment serves not only as a source of financing but also as a strategic instrument in international relations.<sup>2</sup> Dependence on a single investor country can influence a country's political position, requiring governments to balance development needs with national interests. Therefore, investment policy is no longer simply an economic issue but rather part of a governance and diplomatic strategy that determines regional stability.<sup>3</sup>

David Nazar Cautino discusses Chinese investment in Vietnam's metro system in his article, "Vietnam's Policy Toward Chinese Investments in Metro Systems: Hedging and Selective Engagement in Infrastructure Development." Cautino's article explains that Vietnam's metro system is a state-subsidised transportation service expected to generate profits. Challenges related to infrastructure development and maintenance are crucial and are addressed through political-economic policy configurations involving multiple parties to ensure the sustainability of the metro system. Vietnam implements Chinese investment with controls and low risk while opening access to external investment to minimise long-term dependence.

On the other hand, accelerated development has led to increased migration across regions and countries, making Southeast Asian societies increasingly multicultural. In this context, many migrant families experience a language shift, a shift from the use of their mother tongue to a national or international language considered to have greater economic

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<sup>1</sup> M. Foucault, "Governmentality," in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell et al. (University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, "China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing's International Relations," *International Security* 44, no. 2 (2019): 9–60; A. L. Vuving, "Vietnam's Hedging Strategy and the Future of Southeast Asian Security," *Asia Policy* 15, no. 1 (2020): 1–28.

<sup>3</sup> Johnston, "China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing's International Relations"; OECD, *Government at a Glance Southeast Asia* (OECD Publishing., 2023).

value.<sup>4</sup> This phenomenon demonstrates that modernisation is often accompanied by a decline in the use of local languages as part of cultural identity. Yet language is not only a means of communication but also a medium for transmitting values, local knowledge, and a community's history. If not balanced with educational policies that respect linguistic diversity, social transformation can lead to the loss of the cultural richness that is a key characteristic of Southeast Asian societies.

The article, "Language Shift Among Migrant Families: Linguistic Practices in Multicultural Urban Areas," by Marista Christina Shally Kabelen, Atik Kuniawati, and Rusfadia Sektiyanti Jahja, explains the phenomenon of language and cultural disconnection in five Indonesian cities: Jakarta, Bogor, Depok, Tangerang, and Bekasi, commonly known as Greater Jakarta (Jabodetabek). Their research shows that in multiethnic urban environments dominated by national languages, mother tongues lose their instrumental function and remain merely symbols of identity. This process stems not only from individual choice but is more a product of structural pressures at the individual, family, community, and

Apart from economic changes and changes in people's cultural identity, development also increases pressure on the environment. Urbanisation, industrialisation, and public consumption increase the volume of waste, air pollution, and the exploitation of natural resources. Many countries in Southeast Asia face challenges in managing urban waste and maintaining environmental sustainability. This problem shows that development cannot be measured solely by growth in gross domestic product (GDP), but also by a country's ability to maintain a balance between economic growth and environmental sustainability. Waste management, emission reduction, and the transition to a green economy are important agendas that require collaboration between the government, the business world, and society. Without behaviour change and public participation, environmental policy will struggle to achieve sustainable outcomes.

Prima Yustitia Nurul Islami and Nada Arina Romli explained that the problem of waste management is an important factor in assessing the extent to which awareness of a clean, comfortable, and sustainable environment is part of clean-living behaviour in Asia. This article is entitled *Why Attitudes Are Not Enough: A Meta-Analysis of Waste Management Behaviour in Asia*. Several countries, as case studies, namely Vietnam, Iran, China, Indonesia, and Japan, present findings on behaviour and waste management. Among them is environmental awareness, which is linked to Asian people's behaviour and is driven by psychosocial mechanisms that vary across countries.

Social transformation also influences the way society expresses political aspirations. In recent years, public spaces in various Southeast Asian cities have become arenas for social

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<sup>4</sup> Joshua A. Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages* (Multilingual Matters, 1991); Janet Holmes, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, 4th ed. (Routledge, 2013).

expression through murals, street art, and various forms of visual communication. Murals not only have an aesthetic function but also serve as a means of dialogue between society and the state. Its presence shows that citizens are no longer just recipients of policies but actors who actively monitor and evaluate how the government is run. Therefore, public spaces that are open to public expression are an important indicator of the quality of democracy in the region.

A study in Yogyakarta, which specifically looked at Jogja Asat as a social movement initiated by a group of artists, illustrates the dynamics of resistance politics through murals. The article entitled *Walls that Speak: Murals and Social Criticism in 'Jogja Asat,'* written by Meila Riskia, explores how murals produced by Jogja Asat serve as a forum and a means of access for dialogue and criticism of social issues. One of them is the issue of hotel development, which is worrying and detrimental to the surrounding community due to environmental damage, including a clean water crisis. Through the results of her research, Meila underlined that there is intense, unavoidable competition for space involving local government actors, business people, and artists.

Another aspect that is no less important in the pace of development and government policy is the relationship between the state and religion. In contrast to many Western countries, which tend to separate religion from the public sphere, countries in Southeast Asia still show a very strong role for religion in social and political life. Islam, as the majority religion in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam, has a significant influence on public policy, education, social services, and community development. Religious organisations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah in Indonesia have long contributed to education, health, poverty alleviation, and the strengthening of religious moderation. Partnerships between the state and religious organisations can strengthen the effectiveness of public policy because these organisations have extensive social networks and high levels of trust within society.

However, the increasingly close relationship between the state and religious organisations also requires critical attention. On the one hand, this collaboration can strengthen public services and maintain social stability. On the other hand, excessive closeness can reduce the independence of civil society organisations in carrying out control functions over the government. Therefore, the relationship between state and religion must be built on the principle of equal partnership, so that religious organisations can continue to act as development partners and guardians of democratic values and social justice.<sup>5</sup>

The contemporary situation in Indonesia, following the passage of the Omnibus Law, prompted Skaidra Pulley to write an article titled *"Nahdlatul Ulama-State Alliance?" State Patronage, Extractive Industry, and Religious Civil Society in Indonesia*. Two large Islamic organisations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, have received offers and access

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<sup>5</sup> Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton University Press, 2011).

from the government for mining concessions to manage. On the one hand, Muhammadiyah accepted the offer, while NU had dynamics with pros and cons. Pulley highlights that the alliance of Muhammadiyah, NU, and the state has created a dynamic relationship of dependency and patron-client. The involvement of these two organisations in mining concessions further raises questions about their independence and their Islamic studies, which are critical of state intervention and interests.

These five issues show that development challenges in Southeast Asia are increasingly multidimensional. Investment cannot be separated from geopolitics; the environment is linked to changes in people's behaviour; language is tied to cultural identity; murals reflect the quality of democracy, while the relationship between state and religion determines the strength of civil society in supporting and supervising public policy. Thus, the future of Southeast Asia is determined not only by the region's ability to achieve economic growth but also by its success in building inclusive governance, respecting diversity, maintaining environmental sustainability, and strengthening collaboration between the state and society to face various global challenges.

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