

Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia

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Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia by Dan Slater. Cambridge University Press, 2010. 346 pp.

Dan Slater's book *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia* is a pioneering comparative study of the development of modern states in Southeast Asian countries. By employing a systematic comparative framework grounded in broader theoretical debates in Political Science over state formation, Slater brings Southeast Asia into those debates for the first time and, at the same time, takes the study of Southeast Asian political systems beyond the focus on patron-client relations that have dominated it since the 1960s. In addition, by providing detailed syntheses of the political histories of Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, and shorter summaries of several other cases, he provides a useful introductory text to the politics of these countries. At the same time, however, the work tries to explain too much and demonstrates the limitations of the particular methodological approach adopted.

Generalizing very broadly, there have been two distinct areas of focus in political science scholarship on state-building. One concerns the ability of states to govern generally, and in particular to avert serious challenges to their authority from within their borders, especially from armed groups. This inquiry often centers on asking how states came to enjoy, in the words of Max Weber, a "monopoly of legitimate coercion." The other concerns the ability of states to promote economic development. This often centers on explaining why some states seem capable of promoting economic development without generating corruption or "rent-seeking."

While the concerns of the two sets of literature overlap, they tend to have a different theoretical focus. Much of the first literature has built on the pioneering studies of European state-building, especially those by Charles Tilly, whose argument focused on the hostile environment faced by medieval European states. Tilly argues that the modern, centralized state emerged from the constant preparation for war which forced states to either centralize authority and develop the ability to tax their subjects, or lose their independence. In his pithy phrase, "war made the state and the state made war." Applications of this argument to the contemporary developing world have focused on whether the external environment facing these states has been threatening enough to stimulate state-building. Several authors have even suggested that the prevalence of weak states in Africa is the unintended consequences of providing weak states with an international guarantee of their sovereignty, which removed the military threats needed to stimulate state-building.

By contrast, the literature on state effectiveness and economic development has focused on internal factors, particularly historical legacies. They often follow the historical institutionalist school in identifying "critical junctures" in a country's political development that leave institutional legacies. These studies often explain the difference between successful and unsuccessful economic development strategies as resulting from divergent colonial influences. In their telling, some colonial regimes bequeathed strong administrative structures to their independent successors while others left weak ones.

Not all studies of state-building, of course, fall neatly into one of these two groups. Many scholars use a historical institutionalist approach to explain weak states generally, not just in the area of economic planning. Nonetheless, Slater's study is notable for its self-conscious attempt to incorporate insights from both approaches. Although his approach falls into the "historical institutionalist" school, it avoids the most troubling weakness of that approach – the implicit notion that all avenues for shaping how a country is governed ended with the colonial era. And while it adopts the central insight of the "war-making is state-making" literature, that a severe threat to a state's survival is necessary for its leaders to undertake the challenge of state-building, he breaks with the canon by looking for domestic political threats that could stimulate the same response.

The book's starting point is the same as Tilly's and, indeed, most state-building studies. State-building requires rulers to centralize power, which in turn requires them to take power away from other powerful elites, who are unlikely to give up power without a fight. For this reason, most states are founded on "a provision pact," when states (or rulers) buy off elites with privileges that allow the central state to increase its power in a limited way. However, successful state-building requires a "protection pact" in which states have the power to control elites, but elites accept this pact as the necessary price for survival in the face of a significant threat.

Slater's contribution runs as follows. State building represents a "collective action problem" for elites. The collective, long-term interest of elites is best served by surrendering enough power to the state to enable it to control them while providing enough public goods to allow them to enrich themselves, but their individual, short-term calculations lead them to resist having their own control over resources reduced. When the threat of external invasion is not present, this resistance can only be overcome if elites face severe challenges from below that they want the state to protect them from. Hence "contentious politics" – a term commonly used to determine political situations in which large segments of society engage in intense, even violent confrontation over the basic distribution of power – is necessary for state-building and different patterns of contentious politics explain state-building outcomes.

One of the strengths of the work is the care the author takes to specify what he means by such notoriously vague terms as "elites," "power," and even state-building itself. His model identifies four key elites whose support is needed for state-building to occur: state elites (government officials), economic elites (owners of land and business), middle classes (professional and educated groups), and communal elites (traditional and religious leaders). It also identifies three distinct kinds of power that the state draws from these elites – coercive, remunerative, and symbolic – although the analysis is focused on the intersection of the first two. And when it comes to state-building, a transformation so complex that it defies attempts to easily summarize it in a single measure or process, he offers an admirably succinct and plausible proxy – the ability of a state to raise revenue through direct taxation of income. While this proxy is by no means the entirety of state-building it is as good a single indicator as one could imagine. Direct taxes are necessary for the revenue required to pay for a dramatic expansion of the size of government, require developing considerable administrative capacity to enforce, and, because it is elites who are most likely to resist them, also offer a test of the degree to which the state has succeeded in reducing the power of other elite groups to veto its actions.

Slater's specific argument, then, is that even in the absence of an external threat some Asian states were able to introduce direct taxes to fund the expansion of the size and strength of government. This occurred when they faced a severe enough internal threat that the various elite groups were willing to acquiesce in the expansion of state power for their own survival. These

states were then able to build effective modern states, or, as he prefers, drawing on Hobbes, “leviathans” capable of carrying out other tasks of political control and economic development.

The question is what kind of domestic threat would motivate elites to surrender some of their economic and political power to a “leviathan,” and how severe would it have to be. The term “contentious politics” covers a wide range of disruptive political challenges to the status quo, from social movements to insurgencies, which pit significant sectors of society against one another and are conducted outside normal institutional settings. The trouble, however, is that “contentious politics” is a commonplace in most postcolonial societies and seldom result in state-building. Why, then, do more of these societies not develop effective states? The reason, Slater argues, is that many instances of contentious politics do not really threaten the privileges of elites. For state-building to occur it has to be clear that the threat fundamentally challenges the basis of elite status, in its violence, strength, ideological character, and, most importantly, its location.

The bulk of the book is a historical comparison of state-building trajectories among Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, with a concluding chapter devoted to extending the argument to other Southeast Asian countries. The comparison of the main cases is conducted, as is increasingly common in political science, through thematically organized chapters, each of which compares the three cases at one stage of the argument. The argument itself is a historical one, tracing the effect of colonialism in creating social cleavages, of Japanese invasion in World War II activating them, the onset of “contentious politics,” and elite responses to those challenges. The last step is the most important, of course, and the chapter devoted to it centers on explaining whether elites responded to the threat by creating a pact of “protection” (giving states greater power, especially in the area of direct taxation in order to create stronger coercive apparatus that could protect elites from the challengers) or a pact of “provision” (with elites acquiescing in the expansion of state power over the rest of society as a way of enriching themselves). The book finds that, of the three, Malaysia was the only case that successfully created a “pact of provision” to build a “leviathan,” and argues that this reflected the strength of the communist challenge after Japanese withdrawal at the end of WWII. Various kinds of evidence are provided to support this finding, including the percentages of revenue that came from direct taxes in the 1980s.

But this is the point where the book has some serious problems. All three cases had serious communist insurgencies in the decades after WWII. Indeed, they were chosen for that reason. Slater provides a number of arguments to support the thesis that the insurgencies in Indonesia and the Philippines were not *perceived* as threatening enough by elites to create a pact of protection but none of them is compelling enough to convince at least this reader that the situations in Indonesia and the Philippines were *necessarily* less threatening. The Hukbalahap rebellion in the Philippines in the 1950s was, to be sure, largely rural – Slater suggests that for that reason it was not perceived as directly threatening by elites – and put down with American help, but the communist insurgency in Malaysia was also largely rural and put down by a British colonial government. Slater does argue that the British colonial administration after WWII was forced to rely on resources raised within Malaysia, and this required acquiescence from the elites of the three main ethnic communities (Malay, Chinese, and Indian), who, in turn, felt more threatened by the Malaysian insurgency than Philippine elites did, but this reasoning seems *post hoc* and even tautological. In the case of Indonesia where, as is well known, the threat of a communist insurgency and the brutal crackdown against it led to the establishment of

Suharto's authoritarian New Order regime, the assertion that elites did not feel threatened by the insurgency seems even more puzzling.

The book's discussion of the New Order regime – and the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines, which he also considers – illustrates a second weakness in the book. So far, this review has imposed a coherence on the book's narrative that it does not quite have. That is because Slater really seeks to explain two overlapping outcomes: state-building and authoritarianism. Specifically, the work frames its challenge as explaining the difference between “durable” and “non-durable” *authoritarian* regimes, arguing that durable authoritarian regimes are those that build strong states with “protection” pacts.

However, this generates far more confusion than insight. For one thing, classifying Malaysia as “authoritarian” is a somewhat, shall we say, “contentious” choice. The Malaysian government, especially under former prime minister Mahathir Mohammed was certainly far from the liberal ideals we normally associate with democracy, but it also came to power and retained power through genuine elections. Moreover, the term “durable” itself generates confusion, since, as he acknowledges, both the Suharto and the Marcos regimes lasted several decades. Slater goes to some pains to distinguish conceptually between “durability” and merely surviving a long “duration,” but at the end of the explanation the reader is left wondering how we would ever know which adjective applied to a particular regime. Most importantly, it is unclear why it is even necessary to incorporate “authoritarianism” into a framework that is largely drawn from the state-building literature. Democratic states can and do have “leviathans.” The question of how leviathans are built is not relevant only for authoritarian ones.

This brings us to the most fundamental criticism. It appears to this reviewer that many of the weaknesses in the book's argument stem from a failing common to many “historical institutionalist” approaches. While historical institutionalism has provided us with many nuanced and conceptually sophisticated historical accounts of the emergence of modern political institutions, it has a bias toward providing deterministic explanations, stemming perhaps from its rivalry within political science with more mathematical approaches. This often leads scholars working in this vein to provide overly fine definitions of the outcome they are explaining – the “dependent variable,” in the statistically-inspired language of the field – in order to exclude cases the model may not explain. The same bias also leads scholars to exaggerate the impact of particular historical turning points, while downplaying the significance of others. State-building, like many other outcomes studied by political scientists, is a variegated process that lasts a long time, even centuries. Historically oriented studies would be better served by providing partial explanations and shedding light on portions of the process under way than claiming to produce a model that can retroactively “predict” concrete “outcomes” as if history had come to an end.

With all that, however, Slater has made a crucial contribution. As noted above, the politics of Southeast Asian countries has largely been studied through the lens of “clientelism” and “neo-patrimonialism,” seeing their political systems as forever mired in the politics of personal ties and exchange of favors. Slater has reminded us that there is more to Southeast Asian governance and made a crucial start on a comparative study of Southeast Asian states. More broadly, the work complements traditional accounts of state-building by identifying challenges from sources other than war that could convince elites to strengthen governance institutions. This task is especially important and has the potential to be generalized and applied to island states in Micronesia. The debate over state-building is fundamentally an inquiry into how a politics centered on personal exchange of favors and benefits can be replaced by one focused on collective benefits and impartial administration. Slater's work helps to get us past the

pessimism generated by accounts that treat war or colonial legacies as determinative, instead holding out the possibility that collective challenges such as changing electoral dynamics or the imminent threat of climate change could stimulate similar responses.