

# Ear to Asia podcast



**Title:** Taking the pulse of democracy in Southeast Asia

**Description:** Given the notably mixed results of recent elections in the region, just how healthy is the practice of democracy in Southeast Asia? To distinguish the rhetoric from the political reality, we're joined by keen Southeast Asia political observers Prof Garry Rodan, Director of the Asia Research Centre at Murdoch University, and by Dr Avery Poole, Assistant Director of the Melbourne School of Government.

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**Ali Moore:** Hello, I'm Ali Moore. This is Ear to Asia.

**Joshua Kurlantzick:** You see an alienation with democratic governance in countries including a lot of those surrounding Australia like Thailand, Indonesia, et cetera. You see the breakdown in satisfaction with democracy.  
ABC RN

**Alison Smith:** Philippine President, Rodrigo Duterte, has been called many things, a misogynist, a macho-fascist, an authoritarian, a strongman, But among his own people, Duterte is still overwhelmingly popular. He's the most trusted government official in the country.  
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**Unnamed broadcast journalist:** A victory that even Malaysia's most enthusiastic opposition supporters considered far-fetched.  
ABC News

**Unnamed member of the public:** Now that we won, yes, I think we got a new hope.  
ABC News

**Ivy Josiah:** Malaysians were able to bring a huge, huge change. We got rid of a government that was in place for 60 years, peacefully, through the ballot box.  
ABC RN

**Ali Moore:** Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne. In Ear to Asia, we talk with Asia researchers about the issues behind the news headlines in a region that's rapidly changing the world.

According to longtime Southeast Asia watcher, journalist, and diplomat, Michael Vatikiotis, power is regarded as an absolute attribute. You either have it or you don't, and your life is worth far less if you don't.

When we speak of Southeast Asia, we're referring to a region of 640 million people, across 11 countries with a diversity of cultures, histories, and levels

of economic development. At least on paper, most practice some form of democratic politics. In countries like Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, or Malaysia, citizens go to the polls to elect their leaders with a regularity you'd expect in a modern, democratic state.

But how much does that really tell us about the quality and the degree of representation and political participation? Factor in the dynamics of growing market capitalism, widespread economic inequality, entrenched elites, and an Asian giant to the north, and it's worth asking just how political power is held, shaped, and challenged in Southeast Asian states today.

To discuss the rhetoric and the reality of the political landscape in parts of the region, we're joined by two keen observers of Southeast Asia politics. Politics and international studies professor, Garry Rodan, is director of the Asia Research Center at Murdoch University. He's authored numerous books and articles on the region over a long and distinguished career with a new book just out titled *Participation without Democracy: Containing Conflict in Southeast Asia*. It's from Cornell University Press.

Also with us is international affairs and public policy expert, Dr. Avery Poole. Assistant Director of the Melbourne School of Government where she researches and writes on democracy and governance in Southeast Asia.

Garry and Avery, thanks for joining us and welcome to Ear to Asia.

Garry Rodan: Thank you very much.

Avery Poole: Thank you.

Ali Moore: Well, as we said, Southeast Asia is such a large and extraordinarily diverse region, but, overall, how well represented are its people? Can we generalize at all about the degree and the quality of representation and participation, Garry?

Garry Rodan: When you say, "How well are they represented?" there's an underlying assumption there that representation can be measured against one universal set of criteria. I think one of the interesting things that we've missed, not just in Southeast Asia but more broadly, is that there can be non-democratic as well as democratic forms of representation. The idea that institutions, in and of themselves, such as elections, are intrinsically democratic misses the point about how contingent most institutions are in the way that they operate.

We really have to look at the context within which institutions operate, and we really have to interrogate some of our primary assumptions about what representation means. In the case of Southeast Asia, yes, we do have a great diversity in political regimes, and we do have complex histories that affect the ways in which political and, indeed, economic development is heading and the relationship between those two in contemporary Southeast Asia.

Ali Moore: Avery, would you agree with Garry? Is there any regional norm, if you like, of democracy?

Avery Poole: I don't think there is a regional norm of democracy if we think of norms in ... Well, the way that academics like to define it is with respect to standards of appropriate behavior or common expectations. I think from that perspective, there's certainly no regional norm. I don't just mean that most states in the region are not democratic, although that is the case, but that understandings of what democracy means differ. Also, the way that democracy can be framed for instrumental reasons also differs. In that respect, it's very difficult to generalize about norms of democracy.

Ali Moore: What about democracy, the word itself, Garry, what exactly does it mean? What are we talking about? Is it a definable proposition?

Garry Rodan: It certainly is, but as Avery says, different people subscribe to different ideas and definitions of democracy. But that cannot mean that anybody can claim democracy in any situation. The definitive feature of democracy is the concept that people who are represented in politics have an opportunity to select their representatives and to discipline their representatives. If they don't like what their representatives are doing, then they can remove them.

Institutional mechanisms for that can be many and varied, but the fundamental principle is that people who are operating as representatives of people must be able to be held accountable by those people. That's one of the differences, well, it is the fundamental difference between democratic and non-democratic politics.

Ali Moore: Garry, can we look back? How much, and you hinted at this before, how much of the past, the relatively recent history, colonization, Cold War repression, how much of today's situation in Southeast Asia is connected to where these countries have come from?

Garry Rodan: These legacies are immensely important. When we consider the Cold War that was a context within which many of the countries in the region were seeking to become politically independent. Not all were colonized, and

many of the countries were colonized by different powers. But as a general rule, the context of the Cold War shaped politics in this region in an adverse way from the point of view of the prospects of democracy.

In particular, there were many dictators and authoritarian leaders and authoritarian governments in the region that because they were anticommunist were seen as allies of the West and received a great deal of support to maintain those regimes. It was never the intention, necessarily, of the supporters of these regimes from the West that there would be political repression of the various opponents and critics of authoritarian regimes. But, in practice, that's what often happens.

Ali Moore: What were the implications of that for civil society, the development of civil society?

Garry Rodan: Well, they were stunted. In particular, trade union movements were often affected. Student movements, movements that were generally of a social democratic, let alone socialist or communist nature were adversely affected. It was also a context where the capacity to promote identities and consciousness that would fragment and breakdown civil societies was also fostered by some political elites in the region. Consequently, you have less of the social foundations for social democracy and redistributive politics which is what happened in the advanced capital countries when liberal democracy emerged in the 19th and particularly 20th century.

Ali Moore: Avery, I know that if we're looking at this through an historic lens, you refer to the process of the establishment of ASEAN and what that tells us about these countries, not just within themselves, but how they represent themselves to the broader region.

Avery Poole: The Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN is the primary, intergovernmental body and all the Southeast Asian states except for Timor Leste are currently members of ASEAN. ASEAN has gone through this process of adopting democracy as a standard reference in its rhetoric as a principle and a purpose of the organization. But what we see, of course, is a disconnect between that standard rhetoric and the reality of the significant political diversity of its member states.

Ali Moore: But when it began, I suppose, what was the imperative behind that? There may be the use of the word democracy, but, really, they needed to grow, they needed development, and that created its own imperatives, didn't it?

Avery Poole: The adoption of the principle of democracy as a standard aspect of ASEAN rhetoric is a much more recent thing. But if we go back to the origins of

ASEAN, I think there was much more focus on internal stability and consolidation of internal rule of newly independent states. The founding members of ASEAN were Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia. Those states were all, as Garry has mentioned, really quite concerned with the threat of Communist insurgents and internal stability and security.

So ASEAN was founded, in part, to try to start the genesis of some sense of regional resilience and a resistance to too much influence from great powers outside the region. But also in the mutual recognition that these newly independent states were state-building stage, if you like.

Ali Moore: If we bring this to today, Avery, what do you see as the key forces at work in the region? Is it all about economics? Is it all about globalization? Is it all about inequality?

Avery Poole: Economics is certainly, from a regional point of view, a major concern of ASEAN's, and that was also a very important motivation to create ASEAN in the first place. Certainly, over the subsequent decades, economic integration has been a major aspiration, if you like. Many ASEAN observers argue that, that's the only area where we've really seen any tangible progress for ASEAN.

Ali Moore: Progress on the economic front, but, Garry, if you look at the, I suppose, the flip side of that, and we see that all across the globe the impact of globalization, of growing inequality, is there any difference in Southeast Asia in the impact that those issues are having?

Garry Rodan: No, there's no difference fundamentally, but in the precise way that they play out, I think they're in some cases more intense because of the absence of social democratic movements to put in place things like minimum wages, protections for workers in a whole range of other areas, effective social security and welfare systems, has meant that in some of these cases, the sense of being abandoned by the establishment elites, the sense of dissatisfaction with establishment politics can be quite acute.

The Philippines is the most obvious example of that. The remarkable thing here is that much of the disenchantment has occurred not in context where there isn't fast economic growth. On the contrary, it's where economic growth has been at its fastest, because it's been more apparent, more evident to people in some of these countries that no matter how fast the growth becomes, no matter how sustained it is over many years, some of them have felt that they've been left behind. That even where they have been making progress through upward social mobility, some elements of

the middle class, that the rising cost of living, the rising cost of services has meant that it's a never-ending struggle to achieve substantial material improvement. So there is a lot of disenchantment.

Avery Poole: If I can add to that, Ali and Garry, I think that where this ties in with my comments about ASEAN before is that ASEAN is really a project of political elites. Certainly, there were these goals of economic integration and the benefits of economic cooperation, as I mentioned. But, as Garry notes, the developmental state that we see in some of the key ASEAN founding states and these projects and aspirations are really not benefiting societies across the board. There's been a lot of discussion in ASEAN scholarship about the notion of a two-tier ASEAN, if you like. An ASEAN which is really only meaningful for a certain class, if you like.

The concept of ASEAN itself is not meaningful to, it's fair to say, most people in Southeast Asian states. Certainly, ASEAN is aware of this issue, and around the time of the ASEAN charter which was adopted in 2007, the organization sought to get away from this image of itself as an elite-centric project. But it's questionable how much success it's had in that regard.

Ali Moore: Garry, you mentioned the Philippines, so let's go to some of these countries specifically. It's a fascinating country to watch. Duterte, he still gets very high public approval ratings according to the polls, but he certainly, I suppose, has his own slant on a democratic system.

Garry Rodan: He does indeed. He is a populist in the classic sense that he presents himself as the authentic representative of the people. As a populist, therefore, he doesn't see much need for these intermediary organizations that political theorists talk about, we refer to as civil society whether they be political parties or interest groups or NGOs or trade unions. He presents himself as the person who can solve all the problems that people are mainly concerned with, because he is the authentic representative of the people who've been forgotten.

We look at the context, the background to Duterte's emergence, it's not difficult to understand why this is an attractive proposition. There are so many people who felt so let down for so long by a political system that's dominated by very powerful, oligarchic capitalists and political allies of those people.

The immediate background for Duterte's rise to power was one where, in contrast with so many other regimes, there was an administration under Benigno Aquino III that was avowedly anti-corrupt. Most people would say the President himself was non-corrupt. That compared with most other

regimes, there was much more seriousness taken about arresting corruption as a way of trying to alleviate poverty and so on.

However, it didn't work. For all the emphasis on improved governance and combating corruption, few people could see any substantial material improvement, even though this was a period of accelerated economic growth. And so quite a few people, I think drew the conclusion that even with the best of intent from an administration that seems to have identified the problems that we're concerned about, in real terms, they couldn't make much progress.

The problems the people were still concerned about, the failure of the public transport system, the congestion on the roads, the shortfall in infrastructure, whether it be social or physical ... Some people were concerned about crime levels. Some were concerned about drugs. Some people were concerned about the rising cost of living, even though they were in what seemed to be secure jobs.

Ali Moore: And that Garry, I suppose, as you just outlined sets it up very well for Duterte to lead with his own brand of democratic system, if you like. Avery, can you talk us through his use of language?

Avery Poole: Duterte's use of language in the Philippines since his election in 2016 is I think particularly interesting, because what we see is a founding state of ASEAN which had a democratic transition in 1986, but which in more recent times with the return to strongman rule and Duterte's approach to the war on drugs, in particular, I think it's fair to say, we can see a regression of democracy and certainly some serious concerns about human rights in the country.

But Duterte engages in continued references to democracy. He says, "I believe in democracy, and that's why I ran for President," or when there was a threat to refer his war on drugs to the International Criminal Court, he says, "Well, that's fine. This is a democracy, and that's what you do."

Garry Rodan: Duterte is, in effect, trying to distinguish his idea of democracy from liberal democracy insofar as liberalism accepts the legitimacy and, in fact, celebrates legitimacy of political pluralism, so that, unlike an acute majoritarian system, those that don't win elections or the people that are not represented by people who prevailed in elections still have certain constitutional rights, still have certain opportunities to politically participate.

What we've seen under Duterte though is it's a sort of winner takes all.

Where he's very quickly taken charge of the appointments of the courts. He's transforming some of the key positions in the public bureaucracy. The climate which Duterte's been very instrumental in of intimidation meted out to people who dare to question or criticize has been one in which a plurality of political viewpoints and particularly critical viewpoints is not as welcome now as it was before. Indeed, it's a very intimidating atmosphere now for people and institutions, such as the media.

Avery Poole: Yeah, I was just going to pick up on Garry's comments about cracking down on the media. I'm interested in the way that populist leaders are engaging with this fake news debate. Duterte is one of several leaders, I think, who when there is criticism from the media or journalists making statements that are seen as challenging, they can dismiss those as fake news.

This raises concerns, of course, because in a liberal democracy we expect freedom of the press, freedom of expression, and, of course, alternative outlets for debate and discourse and outlets for opposition perspectives as well.

Ali Moore: Garry, do you see that elsewhere in Southeast Asia?

Garry Rodan: It's been rampant actually. Cambodia, Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, just a couple that have already countenanced or introduced anti-fake news legislation. Of course, in the case of Malaysia in the last election in May this year, there was legislation that was hurriedly introduced which effectively made it illegal by virtue of being deemed fake news to interrogate Prime Minister Najib's activities with regard to 1MDB.

Ali Moore: But yes, I was going to say, Malaysia is one country that stands out in the region as a result of those recent elections, power now in the hands of the opposition for the first time since the country's independence in 1957. It was quite an extraordinary development.

Garry Rodan: Indeed extraordinary, very few people predicted this. Although, in retrospect, we can all see that there were deep conflicts, and there was a fair degree of political polarization for some time. Malaysia is a really interesting example of how the conflicts that have been present which are not altogether unique have been dealt with in a very different way in Malaysia compared with, say, the Philippines and Singapore.

In both Philippines and Singapore, there have been various institutions set up, innovative institutions to provide avenues for new forms of political participation. Because political elites have been cognizant of the fact that the threat of populism in the case of the Philippines which was a reality

with Estrada taking the presidency needed to be averted. In the case of Singapore, there have been setbacks by the PAP standards in the degree of electoral support that they desire to receive in previous years.

But what they've done in both those cases, in Singapore and the Philippines, is set up new forms of consultation, new mechanisms for people to have some sort of input into public policy. There are some important differences between them, but, in effect, they've pursued that line.

In the case of Malaysia, they tried this back in the 1990s and early 2000s with economic consultative committees to try and rein in the conflict that was emerging as the uneven distribution of the costs and benefits of capitalist development were having an impact. However, in Malaysia, those consultative mechanisms and innovations failed pretty fundamentally. Because they invited people on the premise that you could have some input to public policy, we really want to receive this.

What the people who participated in those focused on was the governance mechanisms in Malaysia, the absence of transparency, the presence of corruption, and, in particular, they were concerned to arrest various forms of political patronage which were inherent to the way in which capitalism and politics were organized in Malaysia. This meant that people turned their backs on those things and looked more to political parties or civil society as mediums through which to develop their political participation.

Ali Moore: That's a classic case then, Garry, of where putting in place these alternative forms of representation, people feel like they're having a say, even if it's a very limited say, simply was not enough in Malaysia.

Garry Rodan: It wasn't enough, and it backfired, because the nature of the representation or the participation that was made available had such constraints on it that you, basically, you couldn't touch the question of ethnic Malay political supremacy. That's, in one way or another, what many people wanted to contest.

Ali Moore: You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. I'm Ali Moore, and I'm joined by Southeast Asia politics watchers, Professor Garry Rodan, director of the Asia Research Centre at Murdoch University, and by Dr. Avery Poole of the Melbourne School of Government.

Just before we move away from Malaysia, Avery, are there any lessons from the Malaysian elections that have broader implications for the region,

or is Malaysia just standing out there as a one-off?

Avery Poole: I think possibly it's a little early to tell, but I think we can say that the situation in Malaysia certainly suggests that there are limits to the durability of authoritarian rule. It suggests that even where situations of long-running durability and dominant party politics, it's never the case that we should say that there cannot be change.

Ali Moore: Garry, you wrote that Singapore is "the prime example of how capitalist development and authoritarian rule can be viable partners," viable for how long?

Garry Rodan: Well, who can say? But the traditional argument that there's a functional, positive, and even necessary relationship between liberal democracy and capitalism is harder to sustain. Because not only has Singapore flourished economically for half a century now, China is also demonstrating something similar. Where there are problems of an economic nature, it's hard to isolate those down to authoritarianism per se. I mean we have fundamental problems in our own established liberal democracies of an economic nature that possibly you could argue that things would be different if we had different sorts of democracies.

But I think the really important point is that every experience of capitalist development has its own politics. The ways in which capitalism can be organized can be many and varied. What the Singaporeans are simply demonstrating or the PAP is demonstrating is that you can have rapid, capitalist development without liberal democracy.

The question that's being posed now is, in the absence of liberal democracy, if you have capitalist development that is unregulated and not regulated in a way that ensures a fair distribution of the benefits from capitalist development, then can authoritarian regimes survive and which ones can? That's the sort of challenge that the Singaporean regime faces at the moment.

Ali Moore: It also is a question of the ability to express that displeasure or that feeling of being left out or that sense of inequity. Singapore, for example, and China as well have put in place incredibly successful systems at limiting any form of dissent.

Garry Rodan: They have indeed. One of the problems now is that the Singaporean government and the bureaucracy over which it presides is one that they present as a meritocracy. That one of the big differences they've always emphasized between them and other regimes that have often been

depicted as authoritarian is that our system is a meritocratic one. It's not based on patronage. It's based on merit. People who get to positions of power and influence and wealth have done so by merit and not being given a help up stairs.

Now, whether that stands up to close scrutiny, I'll put to one side for the moment. The important point is that that system, even if you accept that, that's how it works, still produces inequality. This is now becoming abundantly clear in Singapore. In fact, to the extent that meritocracy works, by definition, you must have inequality, because not everybody is equally capable, even if they all started from a level playing field.

And Singapore government has invested so heavily in ideological terms with the idea that it is a meritocracy, and their positions of power are rationalized and justified on that basis, that it's very difficult for them to move away from it now and make concessions to the idea that people have rights and entitlements by virtue of being citizens to a fair distribution of the wealth and productivity that is generated through the economy. They're very suspicious and worried about concepts of social rights or political rights that are inherent to someone as a citizen.

It's a political system that is premised on the idea that benevolent, technocratic elites will do a good job for you, will look after you, and we expect if we do that to be rewarded at the polls. But there is a tussle going on now where in a context of inequality and the government being reluctant to concede to concepts of entitlements, to a better share of wealth by virtue of being citizens that they're facing the biggest challenge yet, I think, in trying to secure the ideology that justifies such a tight elite rule.

Ali Moore: Obviously, Singapore is the perfect example of the sort of challenge that an authoritarian regime faces as it develops, but it's not, I suppose, confined to Singapore. Avery, if you look at that idea of more innovative ways of participation, of political representation without necessarily what we might traditionally think of as democracy behind it, do you see it like Garry? That this is going to be the question, how long is that going to be enough?

Avery Poole: I think there's different ways we can think about innovation in participation. But this idea of participation in a digital sense and the conversation that happens through social media through Facebook, Twitter and so forth. People in Southeast Asian countries, particularly in Indonesia but in other countries as well, are very connected in this way. I think that this is an area where we're seeing some really interesting academic research coming out about what this means for the way that elections are contested but also in

a less formal sense of political participation.

Of course, there is regulation and monitoring by political elites of digital communication, but I think that can only go so far. It must be the case that we're going to see some significant political impact in the future.

Ali Moore: Garry, do you see social media as a significant game changer?

Garry Rodan: I see it as a double-edged sword. The technology per se is neutral. How it's used and to what effect it's put is contingent upon the social and political forces that are in control of those technologies. There are strategies, for example, in the Philippines to intimidate political opponents, to troll and generate false news, as we might call it, through social media, through various forms of digital technologies.

There is a self-declared, die-hard Duterte supporters group that is very well-coordinated, has access to people in power, gets consultancy contracts from the government, and allowances from the presidential operations office as part of a political strategy to keep critics at bay. In Indonesia, we saw with the Ahok controversy where the mayor of Jakarta was hounded and criticized because of statements that he made that were considered by some Islamic groups as blasphemous. That social media there was incredibly important too in essentially mounting an anti-liberal democratic position.

I think Avery's right that this becomes really important now. But the use to which social media or a new digital and electronic media can be harnessed is highly contingent upon the particular circumstances in any one country.

Ali Moore: You mention there Indonesia, another country that's absolutely fascinating. It's been long lauded as a model of democratic transition. But with that rise in religious conservatism, there are questions now being asked about whether it's retreating from democracy. Garry, would you put it in that category?

Garry Rodan: I would say that all regimes in the region and, arguably, even in the established, liberal democracies have elements within them who are seeking to change the regime. What we have in any particular regime is an ascendancy of a particular ideology.

So we may have ... Clearly, in Australia our ascendant ideology is democratic, but there are non-democratic, anti-democratic elements within Australian society, including, arguably, some people who put themselves up for election, who if they were elected and had the option would close down

the political space for many of the people that they don't agree with. Fortunately, they're in a minority in this country.

But in most regimes, there are unresolvable struggles that are continuing to take place between competing world views on how we ought to be organized, who should participate, how, and on what. In the case of Southeast Asia, I think Indonesia's at a point where clearly there are some elements who would like to reverse the democratic gains that have been made since the demise of the Suharto regime. The same could be said of the Philippines and was clearly evident in Thailand where you had a reversal, so these things are in play.

I think that one of the reasons these countries are much more prone to change and dramatic change than the established liberal democracies is for, partly, the reasons that I mentioned before. That when the established liberal democracies evolved, they developed highly advanced civil society relationships, lots of collective organizations. They have been in retreat, because the nature of globalization and the transformation of economies and the ascendance of neoliberal economic policies has made life more difficult for a lot of those organizations. We are undergoing quite a lot of change.

But in the Southeast Asian region when you've got the effects of globalization arousing so much concern among so many different groups, and you don't have strong social democratic movements to try and give representation, effective representation to some of those concerns, then people can look elsewhere. There are plenty of other organizations that have quite radical, non-democratic alternatives to social democratic reform agendas.

Ali Moore: Avery?

Avery Poole: Yes, I think Indonesia is particularly interesting, because for regional scholars and observers, it's been often referred to since Reformasi as the most democratic state in Southeast Asia. I think now that title probably goes to Timor Leste. But what we now see with President Jokowi is what seems like some degree of disenchantment with democracy from a democratically elected leader. He's referred to democracy as having gone too far. He's particularly concerned with political freedom "opening the door for extreme politics." The Vice President, Jusuf Kalla, has made similar comments about democracy as potentially opening the floodgates to extremism and even referred to Afghanistan and Syria and other countries where democracy has been, as he puts it, "enforced from the outside."

That's obviously a very different situation to what we saw in Indonesia in 1998 with the fall of the New Order. But I think it is interesting in Indonesia that we see some winding back, if you like, of the freedom of association with Jokowi's regulations recently of civil society groups which is thought to be a response to these concerns with extremism.

So I think it's pretty crucial what happens in Indonesia for the regional dialogue, what happens in the ASEAN space for how we think about democracy. Because democracy is destabilizing often. Democratic transition can create instability. It's not necessarily a smooth process, and it's not a linear process. There's often backsliding and regression. Now, more and more, that's what we're seeing across the region.

Ali Moore: What about China? What role has China played in terms of the region's political systems? Certainly, I think it would be fair to say that they have been relatively adept at exploiting weaknesses. Would it be fair to put it like that, Garry?

Garry Rodan: I think the most significant thing that's happening at the moment with regard to China is that China by virtue of being so economically advanced now and an exporter of capital and looking for new markets and looking to ensure that its own future is secured by the ways in which developments occur in Southeast Asia and beyond is investing a lot in aid. And it's supplanting the role of Western countries in the past in taking the initiative to try and underwrite major development projects in the region.

When you look at it in a holistic way, there's hardly anywhere that the Chinese aren't making their loans and their aid available. They're filling a vacuum, because the West has retreated in a lot of aid programs or reduced the amount of money available. That's something that requires some sort of response.

Ali Moore: Avery, what are your thoughts on China's role?

Avery Poole: I think that the region has always been particularly concerned about the influence that not just China but the U.S. and, back in Cold War times, the Soviet Union was playing a sort of presence in the region and that difficulty of trying to balance the interests of competing great powers. Now, of course, in recent times, the issue is focused more on China, and the U.S. is competing for influence. China, of course, is a greater influence now that we have what Mark Beeson has referred to as potentially a post-pivot Asia strategy from the U.S. under Trump.

I think Chinese capital is, of course, as Garry says, very important to many

of the states in Southeast Asia. But there's always been this difficult balancing act of wanting Chinese capital and focusing on things like the ASEAN - China Free Trade Agreement and the benefits to economic cooperation with China while also seeking to limit Chinese strategic influence. Of course, some ASEAN member states are claimants in the South China Sea disputes. It seems to me to be just this ongoing balancing act.

Garry Rodan:

Could I just make the point that some of the alarm is premised on the idea that this is a threat to democracy. Well, yes, it is. But, so too, were the interventions of the West in supporting people like Suharto, Marcos, Lee Kuan Yew, and others who very definitely, they've got a lot to answer for in terms of the shortfall in civil society and the lack of resilience in civil society today. Because the legacies that we talked about earlier in this discussion were largely the product of the authoritarianism that these people presided over, and they were supported by Western governments.

Western governments supported those regimes, because there were material and commercial interests that the West had in the region and still has. So in a sense, whether it's the West or the East supporting any regime through aid programs, the really important point is not whether they're from a country that's democratic, the source of the funding, but you have to drill down a bit more deeply.

Clearly, if the liberal democratic governments in the West that have been supporting countries like Cambodia, for example, including with some aid for and some programs to try and assist those democratic forces to push those regimes down more democratic paths, if that level of support is trumped, so to speak, by Chinese who plow in lots more money, then it takes the pressure off authoritarian governments in countries like that to be too bothered about what the West thinks about their human rights records, or the way they treat opposition.

There is definitely a change in geopolitics and a prospect that democrats within the countries of the region who are seeking to bring about more democratic reform will be abandoned. It doesn't necessarily mean that Chinese or anybody else need to actively get involved in any direct sense in the politics of those countries. But by merely being available through aid and funds to help the economic development of those countries makes them less reliant upon governments that might have ambitions to promote democratic development in the region.

Ali Moore:

Professor Garry Rodan and Dr. Avery Poole thank you very much for joining us and for being so generous with your insights.

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Avery Poole: Thank you very much.

Garry Rodan: You're very welcome. Thank you.

Ali Moore: Our guests have been Professor Garry Rodan, director of the Asia Research Centre at Murdoch University and Dr. Avery Poole of the Melbourne School of Government. Garry's latest book which has just been released is entitled *Participation without Democracy: Containing Conflict in Southeast Asia*. It's from Cornell University Press.

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I'm Ali Moore. Thanks for your company.