Abstract: An intense scholarly and public policy debate concerns the optimal design of political institutions for new democracies, particularly those facing deep ethnic or cultural cleavages. Drawing on a book-length study of political engineering in the Asia-Pacific region, this paper surveys the differences between consociational and centripetal approaches to institutional design. After examining the key components of each model, I then examine their application in Southeast Asia, and argue that most Southeast Asian electoral democracies have in recent years eschewed consociational institutions in favour of more centripetal approaches to political reform.
Southeast Asia has undergone a significant political transformation over the past two decades. In 1985, not a single Southeast Asian state could be classified as genuinely democratic. Today, Indonesia is the world’s third-largest democracy, East Timor has emerged as Asia’s newest democratic state, and the Philippines and Thailand remain nominal, if deeply troubled, democracies – Thailand having returned to unstable civilian rule following the 2006 coup, while stagnation continues in the Philippines. These are also the only Southeast Asian countries which meet Huntington’s ‘two-turnover test’ of democratic development¹ – that is, at least two peaceful turnovers of power via the electoral process. By contrast, there have been no turnovers of power in the long-standing ‘semi-democracies’ of Malaysia and Singapore, although both have maintained regular and basically fraud-free elections – but with restrictions on the rights of opposition parties and (particularly in Singapore) a compliant judiciary and a pro-government press. A third Southeast Asian state, Cambodia, is a borderline member of this ‘semi-democratic’ group also: while there have been no turnovers of power since the UN-sponsored polls of 1993, competitive elections do take place, although marred by significant voting irregularities, intimidation and violence.

Complicating this picture, a number of Southeast Asian countries – notably Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand – have also experienced deepening ethno-regional cleavages and a marked politicization of religion, particularly fundamentalist Islam, in recent years. Malaysia is divided not only between the majority bumiputera (literally, ‘sons of the soil’) consisting of Malays and indigenous groups (comprising 62 percent of the population in total) and the large Chinese and smaller Indian minorities, but also between peninsula Malaysia and the more fragmented eastern states of Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo. The Philippines is split at a national religious level between its large Roman Catholic majority and a Muslim minority concentrated in the southern region of Mindanao, and is linguistically fragmented too, with no majority community – the largest group, the Cebuano, make up only 22 percent of the population. In Thailand, recent years have seen a growing rural-urban cleavage between the affluent middle class population of Bangkok and the peripheral regions of the north, northeast, south and west – a phenomenon which came to a head in late 2008 when anti-government protestors from Bangkok’s middle class managed to close the country’s two main airports in their quest for a reversion from one-person, one-vote democracy.
Social diversity is most pronounced in Southeast Asia’s largest state, Indonesia, which is the world’s fourth-largest country with a population of some 240 million. Scattered across 17,000 islands spanning almost four thousand miles, the Indonesian archipelago is one of the world’s most ethnically complex states, encompassing a large Islamic majority as well as Christian, Hindu and other religions, a small but economically powerful Chinese minority, and hundreds of diverse local ethno-regional identities. Another powerful cleavage in Indonesia is the long-standing division between the island of Java, home to over 40 percent of the country’s population, and the rest of the country. Long-standing regional divisions between Java and the outer islands overlap with differences between aliran and santri expressions of Islam, with more fundamentalist Islam having strong bases in Sumatra and some of the other the outer islands. Other religions are also regionalized: Bali is predominantly Hindu, while Christian and animist faiths remain common in the eastern regions of Maluku and Papua, which are also home to hundreds of smaller ethnolinguistic communities. The result is something of an ethnic kaleidoscope.

The political consequences of this multi-layered cultural, regional and religious diversity across Southeast Asia have been profound. In terms of political development, for instance, ethnic and other cleavages have often been seen as an impediment to stable democracy, being associated with fragile political parties, fragmented legislatures, and weak executive government. Representative democracy in Indonesia, for instance, has been hampered recurrently by the consequences of party fragmentation – both in recent years following the collapse of the Suharto regime, but also earlier, during the country’s initial democratic interlude in the 1950s, when shifting coalitions of secular, Islamic, nationalist, communal and regional parties led to six changes of government in seven years, providing a ready pretext for the overthrow of democracy and the declaration of martial law by president Sukarno in 1957. Similarly, the Philippines has long suffered from the consequences of a fragmented social landscape: weak and personalized political parties, patrimonial politics, unstable executive government, and an ongoing crisis of underdevelopment.

The region’s ‘hybrid regimes’ saw a different approach to political development and social diversity, one characterised by Rodan and Jayasuriya as “more participation, less contention”. The semi-democratic (or quasi-authoritarian, depending on your point of view) political systems of both Malaysia and Singapore evolved partly as a result of a perceived need to control the political expression of ethnicity, and the management of
communal relations has remained a cornerstone of politics in both states. The Malaysian case stands out as perhaps the Asia-Pacific’s most enduring example of ethnic powersharing and majority control. Since independence in 1957, Malaysia has been governed by a broad umbrella coalition centred on the major Malay party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), and allied parties representing the main minority communities, notably the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). Along with a range of smaller parties, these parties form the main pillars of the Barisan Nasional that has ruled Malaysia unchallenged since 1974 (prior to this a similar coalition, the Alliance, held sway). While dominated by UMNO, the fact that all Malaysian governments have maintained representation of the country’s three major ethnic groups via this informal powersharing deal has provided a form of credible commitment that their interests will be protected. However, the Barisan’s institutionalization in government has also come at a considerable cost to Malaysian democracy, as the separate identity of the party and the state have become increasingly blurred.

Over the past decade, democratization has opened up opportunities for significant political reform in some countries. The liberalisation of politics in such varied Southeast Asian countries as Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines has opened up opportunities for elites to engage in overt ‘political engineering’ – that is, the conscious design or redesign of political institutions to achieve certain specific objectives. These have seen a move away from the ethnic building-block model of governance typified by Malaysia in favour of more fluid and open models of democracy. In different ways democratic openings in Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines each allowed the introduction of constitutional reforms designed to encourage more nationally-focused political competition and reduce the appeal of parties reliant on regional or ethnic ties. Even the region’s semi-democracies such as Cambodia, Malaysia, and Singapore have introduced more modest reforms in this direction.

In the remainder of this paper, I draw on a book-length study of political engineering in Asia to argue that these kinds of reforms have resulted in a shift away from the consociational politics of the post-independence period towards more integrative or centripetal forms of democracy in Southeast Asia in recent years. In most of these cases of reform, incumbent politicians sought to forge more stable political systems which – while simultaneously limiting room for potential challengers to the established order. In particular, consociational experiments of earlier decades with communal
parties, proportional elections, and powersharing government were increasingly been rejected in favour of new rules designed to transcend rather than reinforce cleavage boundaries.

**Consociationalism**

Two contrasting normative and empirical models of democracy have dominated much of the debate on the issue of how best to ensure stability in ethnically diverse societies. One is the scholarly orthodoxy of *consociationalism*, which relies on elite cooperation between leaders of different communities. Because majoritarian, ‘winner-take-all’ models can lead to ethnic minorities being denied parliamentary representation, it is often argued that such systems are unsuitable for ethnically-diverse societies. For example, simple majority rule when applied in an ethnically-bifurcated society can easily entrench one party or group’s dominance over all others. Because of this, proponents of ethnic powersharing in plural societies often advocate institutions and practices which encourage inter-ethnic balancing in public office, proportional representation of all significant cleavages in parliament, and sharing of power between these various segments in government. Consociationalism is the most established and well-developed of such models.7

Consociational prescriptions are based on the principle that each ethnic polity should enjoy a significant degree of autonomy and a right of veto over matters directly affecting the welfare of its members. Emphasising the need for elite cooperation if democracy is to survive in ethnically-cleaved societies, consociational agreements entail a balance of power within government between clearly defined social segments, brokered by identifiable ethnic leaders representing distinct social groups. Lijphart, the scholar most associated with the consociational model, developed this prescription from a detailed examination of the features of power-sharing democracy in European countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland, and there is disagreement over the extent to which these measures can be applied to other regions.8 However, there is little doubt that consociationalism represents the dominant model of powersharing for “plural societies” – that is, in Lijphart’s terminology, “societies that are sharply divided along religious, ideological, linguistic, cultural, ethnic or racial lines into virtually separate subsocieties with their own political parties, interest groups, and media of communication”.9
In terms of political engineering, consociationalists focus on core democratic institutions such as political parties, electoral systems, and cabinet governments, and on the territorial division of state powers via federalism. In each case, the focus is on defining and strengthening the autonomy of communal components of the society in question. In terms of political parties, for example, consociational approaches favour parties which represent social cleavages explicitly, via what Pippa Norris has characterized as “bonding” rather than “bridging” strategies – that is, parties which “focus upon gaining votes from a narrower home-base among particular segmented sectors of the electorate”. The ideal party system for consociationalists is one based around clear social cleavages in which all significant groups, including minorities, can seek representation through their own, ethnically-exclusive political parties. Only through parties based around segmental cleavages, consociationalists contend, can political elites negotiate delicate ethnic issues effectively.

To ensure the fair representation of such ethnic parties, consociational prescriptions invariably recommend proportional representation (PR) electoral systems, with a preference for large-district party list systems which ensure a close parity between the proportion of the vote won by a party and its parliamentary representation. Optimally, ‘closed’ party lists which do not enable voters to select individual candidates (thus strengthening the autonomy of party leaders) combined with large multi-member electoral districts (to maximize proportionality of outcomes), are favoured.

Perhaps most importantly, in addition to PR, consociationalism also advocates ‘grand coalition’ governments, in which all significant parties are given a share of executive power, and in which minorities have the right of veto over important issues directly affecting their own communities. Southeast Asian countries to have experimented with grand coalition cabinets include Cambodia (where the 1993 constitution required a two-thirds vote of confidence for the investiture of new governments), Indonesia (both during the 1950s and again under the presidency of Abdurrahman Wahid between 1999 and 2001) and, in the most well-institutionalised arrangement, for several decades in Malaysia, as part of the long-ruling cross-ethnic alliance.

Malaysia’s ethnically-defined political system, in which communal parties representing Malay, Chinese and Indian voters come together to form a national alliance or Barisan Nasional, a multi-racial coalition of 14 parties in peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak, has frequently been identified as the clearest example of consociationalism in Southeast Asia. Singapore has also been identified as operating according to
consociational principles, although of course it is far from a competitive democracy. Consociational arrangements were also once widespread in other countries, as part of Southeast Asia’s initial post-colonial democratic experiments in the 1950s. For example, Burma’s 1948 constitution provided for a combination of ethnically-based states, reserved parliamentary seats for specified groups, and ethnic ‘councils’ to look after the interests of intermixed or dispersed minorities. Indonesia’s short-lived democratic incarnation in the 1950s was another example of consociationalism in practice. During this period, Indonesian ethnic and religious groups formed their own parties and were routinely included in grand coalition governments, on the assumption that “ethnic and other demands would be articulated through the party system and conflicts would be settled through negotiation and compromise in the parliament”.

The one shared feature of all these examples of post-colonial consociational government is that they proved incompatible with open, competitive democracy. In Indonesia, the 1950-7 parliament represented virtually the full spectrum of the country’s social diversity, but its inability to maintain a stable political centre led directly to the end of democracy in 1957 and four decades of authoritarian rule. Burma’s post-independence democracy survived for 14 turbulent years until 1962, before being overthrown in a military coup which had strong ethnic motivations. Likewise, the quasi-authoritarian political systems of both Malaysia and Singapore evolved partly as a result of a perceived need to control the political expression of ethnicity, and the management of communal relations has remained a cornerstone of politics in both states. The eclipse of democracy in each of these cases, and its replacement with forms of semi-democracy (in Singapore and Malaysia) or outright authoritarianism (in post-colonial Indonesia and Burma), has presented a powerful negative example for Southeast Asia’s contemporary political engineers.

Centripetalism

Centripetalism represents an alternative approach to political engineering, especially for ethnically-plural democracies, which has become increasingly popular in recent years. So called “because the explicit aim is to engineer a centripetal spin to the political system – to pull the parties towards moderate, compromising policies and to discover and reinforce the centre of a deeply divided political spectrum”, centripetalism emphasizes the importance of institutions that can encourage integration across ethno-
political divides. In opposition to consociational recommendations, centripetalists maintain that the best way to manage democracy in divided societies is not to simply replicate existing ethnic divisions in the legislature and other representative organs, but rather to depoliticize ethnicity by putting in place institutional incentives for politicians and their supporters to act in an accommodatory manner towards rival groups. Scholars such as Donald Horowitz have consistently advocated political institutions which encourage cross-ethnic behaviour, such as electoral and party systems which encourage the pooling of votes across ethnic lines.20

In an earlier book on electoral engineering for divided societies, I defined centripetalism as a political system or strategy designed to focus competition at the moderate centre rather than the extremes, and identified three facilitating components:

(i) the presentation of electoral incentives for campaigning politicians to reach out to and attract votes from a range of ethnic groups other than their own, thus encouraging candidates to moderate their political rhetoric on potentially divisive issues and forcing them to broaden their policy positions;

(ii) the presence of multiethnic arenas of bargaining such as parliamentary and executive forums, in which political actors from different groups have an incentive to come together and cut deals on reciprocal electoral support, and hence perhaps on other more substantial policy issues as well; and

(iii) the development of centrist, aggregative and multiethnic political parties or coalitions of parties which are capable of making cross-ethnic appeals and presenting a complex and diverse range of policy options to the electorate.21

Like consociationalism, centripetal proposals for conflict management focus on parties, elections, and representative institutions as the key focus of political engineering. However, the institutional recommendations made by centripetalists often run sharply counter to those of consociationalists. For instance, rather than focussing on the fair representation of ethnically-defined political parties, centripetalists place a premium on promoting multiethnic parties and cross-ethnic activity. To achieve this, electoral processes can be structured so as to require successful candidates to gain support across different regions of a country, thus helping to break down the appeal of narrow parochialism or regionalism. The ‘distribution requirement’ introduced for the 2004 presidential elections in Indonesia, where winning candidates had to gain at least 20 percent of the vote in at least 16 provinces in the first round of elections to avoid a
runoff, which required presidential candidates to gain support across the archipelago, is an example of such a system.

There are a range of options to encourage political parties to present mixed slates of candidates for elections. Some of these are relatively weak: some scholars, for instance, cite electoral arrangements in the Philippines (where senators are elected on a nationwide basis, making cross-national support essential) or East Timor (where most parliamentarians are similarly elected from across the country as a whole rather than local districts) as encouraging a focus on national rather than regional or sectoral interests. But these provide only weak incentives for cross-ethnic appeals. A clearer case of a cross-ethnic voting can be found in Singapore, where ‘Group Representation Constituencies’ (GRCs) are used. There, parties and alliances contesting any of the 14 multimember GRCs must include candidates from designated ethnic minorities on their ticket, and voters must choose between competing party slates rather than individual candidates – arrangements which effectively require a degree of cross-ethnic voting, while guaranteeing that parliamentarians of Chinese ethnicity will retain 3/4 of the parliament’s 93 seats, but that at least nine will be occupied by Malays, and five by Indian or other minorities.

A more direct and more powerful centripetal approach to electoral system design is to use preferential, rank-order electoral systems such as the alternative vote, which require voters to declare not only their first choice of candidate, but also their second, third and subsequent choices amongst all candidates standing. If no-one gains an outright majority, these votes are transferred according to their rankings in order to elect a majority-supported winner. Because they make politicians from different parties reciprocally dependent on preference transfers from their rivals, such systems present candidates who wish to maximize their electoral prospects with an incentive to try to attract secondary preference votes from other groups, so as to ensure the broadest possible range of support for their candidacy. While such an approach was briefly advocated in Indonesia it has not been adopted in Southeast Asia, although the neighbouring Pacific Island states of Papua New Guinea and Fiji have both adopted such systems in recent years.

An important difference between consociational and centripetal approaches to conflict management is their contrasting recommendations regarding political parties. As already noted, consociationalists advocate the presence of ethnically-based parties and party systems, and see a virtue in having a multiplicity of parties representing all
significant social groups. By contrast, centripetalists ideally favour an aggregative party system, in which “one or two broadly-based, centrist parties fight for the middle ground”\(^{24}\) and therefore tend to endorse the development of multiethnic parties or party coalitions. Indonesia’s current requirement that all political parties must demonstrate a nationwide organisational base before they are eligible to take part in elections is an example of this kind of centripetal approach. Each registered political party wishing to compete in national elections has to establish branches across a set proportion of provinces (initially one-third and now two-thirds of all provinces), as well as offices in more than half (now two-thirds) of the districts or municipalities within these provinces, before they could contest the election.

As Dwight King notes, “where previously the number of election contestants was stipulated by law, permitting only three, now they were limited on the basis of insufficient geographical coverage and depth of penetration of their organizations”\(^{25}\). The bias in favour of national parties in Indonesia is today so strong that regional parties are even banned from competing in elections to the regional assemblies, where again only national level parties were permitted (an exception was made for Aceh under the terms of the recent peace deal there). In other words, Indonesian policymakers have explicitly rejected the orthodoxy that regional governments should be representative of their own constituents. Rather, they have taken the national bias in the electoral system to an extraordinary level: instead of allowing regional governments to be representative of their own constituent populations, the law forces them to be comprised of the same parties which compete at the national level. Indonesia’s current party rules are thus the exact opposite of what consociationalists would recommend, and are one of the most extreme versions of centripetal incentives to be found anywhere in the world.

While centripetal reforms are focussed on political institutions, non-institutional factors are also important. For example, while consociationalism assumes that enlightened elites are the driving force for inter-ethnic moderation in divided societies, centripetalism places more faith in the behaviour of campaigning politicians and their supporters on the ground, and it is assumed that voters will follow the lead of their political leaders and pool votes across ethnic lines when asked to. In Malaysia, for example, the long-standing centripetal practice of vote-pooling across ethnic lines has been a mainstay of national politics for decades, and was a major factor in the Barisan’s victory in 1999 at the height of the Asian economic crisis, when the rural Malay vote deserted the coalition.\(^{26}\) More generally, whereas consociational prescriptions are seen
as relying predominantly on constraints (such as minority vetoes) against hostility, the centripetal approach focuses on the need for incentives to motivate accommodative behaviour via the search for secondary support. This further distinguishes the centripetal model from that of consociationalism.

**Communalism**

A third approach to building stable democracy in ethnically diverse societies is to explicitly recognize the importance of group identity in politics by making social cleavages a fundamental building block of the entire political system – for example, by ensuring that ethnic representation and ratios are pre-set according to explicit communal criteria in the electoral system, the parliament, and other key institutions. Under such schemes, legislative seats are often allocated on a communal basis, and in some cases the entire political system is based upon communal considerations – distinguishing it from the ‘self-determined’ model of ethnic representation favoured by consociationalists. In New Zealand, for example, Maori electors can choose to have their names registered on either the national electoral roll or a specific Maori roll, from which seven indigenous representatives are chosen. A related approach is to explicitly reserve some seats so as to ensure the legislative representation of specific communal groups: India, where one-fifth of parliamentary seats are reserved for scheduled tribes and castes, is a well-known example. Reserved seats for representatives of overseas Chinese in Taiwan, or non-indigenous minorities in Samoa are exemplars of this approach. In contrast to specifically communal representation, however, such seats are usually elected by all voters in much the same manner as other members of parliament.

Although it retains a foothold in parts of Asia and the Pacific through such instruments, communalism has faded in popularity since its heyday in earlier periods of colonial rule, when such schemes were often introduced in early representative bodies under British colonialism. There are several reasons for this disenchantment with communalism. A core problem is that communal schemes inevitably require some official recognition and determination of group identity. As well as creating real moral dilemmas, this official designation of ethnicity assumes that ethnic identities are immutable and enduring, and thus can contribute to the solidification of ethnic politics rather than its breakdown. Because of this, communal systems tend to suffer from a distinct lack of flexibility: changes in the proportions of ethnic groups present in the community are not reflected in the larger political system, which is effectively frozen in time from whenever the original determinations of group proportions were made. Finally, communalism by its
nature mitigates against political integration: it is exceptionally difficult to establish national political parties, for example, under a system of communal representation. For all of these reasons, communalism is mostly a historical phenomenon, manifested in examples such as Burma’s 1948 constitution cited above, and holds little contemporary appeal in Southeast Asia.

The Southeast Asian Experience

What does the Southeast Asian experience reveal about the relative appeal of the consociational, centripetal and communal models of democratic institutional design? While aspects of all three models have been applied at different times, in recent years Southeast Asian states have shown a preference for centripetal forms of political engineering and a shift away from consociational models. As Allen Hicken notes, most reforms “have favoured centripetal institutions and political parties … The vast majority of Southeast Asian states have opted for institutions and regulations consistent with aggregative goals.”

Centripetal measures have been especially popular amongst the region’s more ethnically diverse democracies: examples include the introduction of regional vote distribution requirements for presidential elections in Indonesia, multiethnic group representation constituencies in Singapore, and party-list elections for specified non-ethnic sectoral groups in the Philippines. However, as Aurel Croissant has noted, devices like the Philippines party list have had little real impact, exacerbating rather than addressing disproportional election outcomes and minority under-representation.

Even in those countries which use proportional representation electoral systems, there has been a trend over time towards more majority-enhancing reforms. For example, while both Indonesia and Cambodia continue to use party-list PR, demands for the introduction of a mixed or district-based system as a means of stimulating greater political accountability have been articulated across the political spectrum in both countries. In Indonesia, the 2004 elections saw a drastic reduction in ‘district magnitude’ – that is, the number of members elected from each electoral district. In contrast to previous years, where provincial units delineated constituency boundaries, legislative elections are now conducted using much smaller constituencies, capped at a maximum of 12 members per district. This raised the threshold for electoral victory considerably and made it much more difficult for smaller parties to win seats than at previous elections, when districts were based around entire provinces.
effect was to make Indonesia’s 2004 electoral arrangements considerably more
majoritarian than previously.

In Cambodia too, reforms to the UN-inherited PR electoral system has sharply reduced
electoral proportionality. In 1998, the electoral formula was changed so that seats were
allocated according to the ‘highest average’ method at the provincial level, rather than
the nationwide ‘largest remainder’ system used in 1993 – a change which discriminated
against smaller parties. In response to calls for greater local accountability, district
boundaries were adjusted and a number of new districts created, with the result that over
one-third of all Cambodian parliamentarians now represent single-member districts. As in Indonesia, the net effect of these changes has been the elimination of many small
political parties, to the advantage of the larger incumbents.

The electoral arrangements of Asia’s two resilient semi-democracies, Malaysia and
Singapore, also remain highly majoritarian. While the core features of the electoral
system have remained unchanged since independence in both states, a succession of
apparently technical changes have tilted the electoral playing field increasingly in
favour of incumbents. Malaysia uses a standard Westminster system with plurality
elections, but constituency boundaries are gerrymandered to favour rural communities,
and the electoral commission is a compliant servant of the government. The BN alliance
has never lost an election, although the 2008 elections – in which Anwar Ibrahim’s
reformist Parti Keadilan Rakyat, an explicitly pan-ethnic party, emerged as the second-
biggest party – may herald a new era in Malaysian politics. For the first time since 1969
UMNO no longer commands the two-thirds parliamentary majority necessary to freely
amend the Constitution, and also lost power to the Islamist PKS movement in a number
of key states.

The position of the long-ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) in Singapore remains
considerably more secure. As noted previously, in a deviation from its British colonial
heritage, most of Singapore’s parliamentary representatives are elected from multi-
member constituencies each returning between four and six members; voters choose
between competing party lists rather than candidates; and the highest-polling party wins
all seats in the district. Although providing a nominal level of multi-ethnic
representation, as described earlier, the real effect of this measure is to both maintain the
multiethnic character of and hugely over-represent the PAP, which regularly wins over
90 percent of seats in parliament. Some have argued that the enshrinment of race as a
form of political representation also serves to marginalize class-consciousness and thereby further weaken the capacity for anti-government collective action.\footnote{33}

Finally, in Thailand, the electoral system has come almost full circle over the past decade. The reformist 1997 constitution abandoned the long-established block vote system, in which candidates from the same party competed with each other in small multi-member electorates, in favour of a mixed system structured along similar lines to the Philippines system, with 400 seats elected from single-member districts by plurality rules, and another 100 chosen by PR from a national list. In combination with a 5% list threshold (to weed out splinter parties) and rules requiring party membership for all MPs (to reduce pre-election party-hopping), these reforms were designed to strengthen the party system and ensure political stability. This they did, all too well: the electoral and party reforms coincided with (and helped facilitate) the emergence of Thaksin Shinawatra, one of Thailand’s richest men, and his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party as the country’s dominant political force, becoming the first government in Thailand’s democratic history to win an election outright and last a full parliamentary term.

The military coup of 2006 which removed Thaksin from power saw the 1997 Constitution abrogated and the promulgation of a new “Peoples Charter” constitution which removed many of these incentives for strong parties and stable government. In an apparent attempt to undermine the possibility of TRT or its offshoots ever returning to power, the electoral system has reverted to the old (and discredited) block vote model of multimember constituencies, although maintaining 80 list seats elected on a regional, rather than national basis – a move designed to dilute the voting power of the northern provinces where Thaksin’s support was strongest.\footnote{34} This unlikely and unwieldy combination is likely to have the odd effect of both re-fragmenting the party system while simultaneously undercutting equitable representation.

Table 1 sets out these changes in electoral systems across Southeast Asia since 1990.

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<th>Country</th>
<th>Former Electoral System</th>
<th>New Electoral System</th>
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How do we explain the pronounced move away from electoral proportionality in much of Southeast Asian? One factor is clearly the desire of incumbents to minimize the threat of political fragmentation by restricting the electoral prospects of opposition parties. But more lofty aims have also been also present: political reformers in countries such as post-Suharto Indonesia and post-1997 Thailand hoped to encourage more cohesive political parties which could appeal to national rather than regional or local constituencies. Indeed, when attempts to shape the development of their party systems themselves are examined, it is clear that in addition to using electoral system design to try to change the way political parties function, many Southeast Asian states have also attempted to reform their party systems more directly, through overt engineering of the rules governing the formation, organization and behaviour of political parties.

The Indonesian example described above is the clearest example of this approach. As well as restricting the ability of regional parties to contest elections, Indonesia’s new party laws also attempt to limit party numbers by introducing systemic pressures for smaller parties to amalgamate with each other. Following the 1999 election, parties which failed to gain more than two percent of seats in the lower house of parliament or three percent of seats in regional assemblies had to merge with other parties to surmount these thresholds in order to contest future elections – a provision which resulted in a number of smaller parties amalgamating prior to the 2004 elections. A similar trend was evident in Thailand’s now abandoned 1997 Constitution, which introduced a range of reforms to strengthen the party system and combat fissiparous tendencies. These led to a sharp decline in the number of parliamentary parties in Thailand which, combined with the electoral reforms discussed above, had a significant impact, clearly assisted the TRT to capture and control government – in coalition after 2001, and along after 2004.35

Indeed, in both Thailand and Indonesia, the introduction of the new party rules led to a fifty percent fall in total party numbers between pre-reform and post-reform parliaments. In Thailand, the effective number of parties declined from an average of 7.2 in the ten-year period from 1986-96 to 3.8 at the first post-reform elections in April 2001. In Indonesia, the absolute number of parties competing in the elections dropped from 48 parties contesting the 1999 election to 24 parties for the 2004 poll – again, a fifty percent decline over one parliamentary term – and a similar but less extreme decline in
the number of parties in parliament, from 21 in 1999 to 17 in 2004 – although the effective number of parties in parliament actually rose, from 5.4 in 1999 to 8.3 in 2004, as votes which went to the smaller parties in 1999 were spread more evenly across the established larger parties.

Compare this with the Philippines, whose 1987 constitution was also based on the desire for a more inclusive and responsive political system, but which included no reductive constraints upon party fragmentation. There, party numbers have steadily increased since the return to democracy in 1986, especially compared with the experience of the pre-Marcos democratic period from 1946-69. Since 1986, party fragmentation has grown to more than double the level that applied in the 1946-69 period – an ironic outcome, as an underlying aim of the 1986 constitution was to improve political stability.  

A final deviation from consociationalism has been in the area of executive government formation. A core consociational practice is the formation of grand coalition governments to ensure inclusion and maintain stability by including all significant parties in cabinet. As noted earlier, such all-encompassing governing coalitions seem to have not been rejected in recent years. Cambodia and Indonesia are both examples of this trend. In Cambodia, a two-thirds majority requirement for government investiture was written into the Constitution after the 1993 election, in which the incumbent Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) gained fewer seats than the royalist opposition, FUNCINPEC, but no party won a working majority. Under threat of a civil war if it was excluded from government, a deal brokered by the United Nations saw a powersharing coalition featuring ‘co-prime ministers’ from the two parties installed, which proved highly unstable in practice. This fell apart in 1997 when the CPP forces of the ‘second Prime Minister’, Hun Sen, attacked those of FUNCINPEC in order to wield power alone.

Nonetheless, the CPP-FUNCINPEC coalition was revived for a second time after the 1998 elections – not through any rapprochement between the party leaders, but solely due to the two-thirds requirement for government formation that had earlier been inscribed, at the CPP’s insistence, into the constitution as a safeguard against their marginalisation from power. Again, this deal was less about sharing power than in ensuring peace, with Hun Sen (who controlled the country’s military and most of the bureaucracy) continuing his role as sole prime minister, while Ranariddh and other members of the opposition (such as the new Sam Rainsey Party) were either co-opted or
sidelined. Following the 2003 election, the two-thirds majority requirement again led to a standoff between the two major parties over the formation of a national government, with observers branding the powersharing rule “a significant obstacle to forming elected government and to political stability”.  

In Indonesia, several attempts to form a grand coalition representing all significant parties were made in the wake of the transitional 1999 elections by President Aburrahman Wahid. However, Wahid’s so-called ‘National Unity Cabinet’ proved highly unstable in practice, with a bewildering array of ministers appointed and then removed over the 22 months of Wahid’s presidency. Following a protracted power-struggle the Indonesian legislature – the only directly-elected organ of state in existence at the time – asserted its growing strength and in August 2001, effectively impeached Wahid and replaced him with his vice-president, Megawati Sukarnoputri. While continuing the practice of oversized coalitions, she did not attempt to replicate the grand coalition model directly. Instead, harking back to the politics of her father, former president Sukarno, she described her first cabinet as a Gotong Royong (mutual cooperation) government – in political science terms, an oversized cabinet but not a grand coalition. This approach was continued by her successor, President Yudhoyono, who formed what he called an ‘Indonesian unity’ oversized cabinet following his election in 2004. Despite this, it is also clear that Yudhoyono, like his predecessors, has maintained the practice of co-opting representation from most other significant parties into his governing administration, thereby swallowing up potential opposition.  

**Conclusion**

In summary, recent democratic reforms in Southeast Asia have seen a move away from the consociational approaches of earlier decades in favour of more centripetal and majoritarian models. While broad practices of ethnic balancing and coalition governments continue to resonate, specific consociational institutions are now few and far between. Across Southeast Asia, electoral systems have become less proportional, party laws have attempted to coerce aggregative rather than monoethnic political parties, and attempts to mandate inclusive powersharing executive governments have proven difficult or unworkable. Even in areas not examined by this paper, such as minority rights initiatives or moves to grant special autonomy to ethnically-distinct regions in Indonesia and the Philippines, Southeast Asian governments have tended to
shy away from explicit recognition of ethnic groups, and rejected approaches based on group rights or minority vetoes.

Why has consociationalism lost its appeal? There are many possible explanations, but one reason is surely the comprehensive failure of so many consociational experiments with post-colonial democracy in the 1950s and 60s – including the overthrow of introduced democratic systems in Burma and Indonesia, as well as the erosion of competitive democracy in favour of quasi-authoritarian rule in Singapore and Malaysia. In all of these cases, the inability of post-colonial political systems to cope with the realities of ethnic politics played a role in their downfall, and has provided a powerful negative example for contemporary reformers.

Another possible explanation for this shift is the globalization of political advice that has occurred over the past decade. With the collapse of communism and the ‘third wave’ of democratization in the 1990s, there was a tremendous upsurge of interest in the possibilities of institutional designs for democracy. Accompanying this was a change in the dynamics of international development assistance and the role of multilateral institutions such as the United Nations. Spurred by the liberalization of previously autocratic states in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America, the international community began to invest heavily in concepts of democracy promotion, electoral support and ‘good governance’ as essential elements of economic development and the creation of stable and peaceful states. Accompanying this was a surge of democracy assistance programs offering advice to new democracies on institutional reforms, with academics and advisors from around the world. This process opened up many more options to choose from for contemporary political engineers than was the case in earlier decades.

Finally, there is the key issue of democratic development over time. A number of examinations of the practical record of consociationalism in divided societies have concluded that they may work better as interim devices to maintain the peace in deeply-divided societies than in the longer-term: “if consociational structures are entrenched in plural societies which do show potential for the withering away of ethnic voting, then the very institutions designed to alleviate tensions may merely entrench the perception that all politics must be ethnic politics.” Similar conclusions have been reached by recent book-length studies of powersharing in post-conflict societies and in transitions from war to democracy. This raises the question of whether consociational models of
ethnic politics have a limited lifespan as ethnic allegiances become less predominant and political evolution towards more ‘normal’ politics takes place.

The Malaysian case is instructive here. Although consociational practices have been the foundation of Malaysian politics for decades, recent political evolution has seen clear steps towards a more multiethnic and competitive model of democracy. Demands for greater political openness and a shift away from ethnic politics has accompanied the country’s economic development, with increasing criticism that the control of social conflict has come at the cost of flagrant gerrymandering, malapportionment in favour of rural areas, suppression of opposition movements, restrictions on basic freedoms and intimidation of political opponents, all aimed at ensuring the ruling coalition’s continuation in power. In recent years, the foundations of the Malaysian model of consociationalism have started to crack. Malaysia’s 2008 elections were a watershed event: for the first time since 1969, UMNO lost its two-thirds parliamentary majority (and with it the power to amend the constitution unilaterally). While the Barisan retained a working parliamentary majority, a surge of cross-ethnic support for the reformist Parti Keadilan Rakyat led by former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim saw it become the second-largest party in parliament.

This raises the real possibility of a first-ever change of government in Malaysia in the not-too-far-distant future. Were this to happen, it could mark a decisive break with the long-dominant trade-off on which Malaysian politics has been based: namely the control of ethnic mobilization and potential social conflict through restrictions on open democracy, along with pro-Malay affirmative action and ethnic gerrymandering. While ethnic balancing is likely to remain important regardless of which coalition is in power, the success of Keadilan may herald a shift in Malaysian voter support towards pan-ethnic politics in the future. Of course, speculation about future political development is a highly uncertain process, and many other outcomes are possible at the time of writing. But if a move towards a more explicitly multiethnic and pluralistic model of politics were to occur, it would likely represent a final and decisive step in the demise of consociationalism – not just in Malaysia, but across Southeast Asia more generally.


20 In addition to vote-pooling electoral systems, Horowitz identifies four other mechanisms which characterise his approach to moderating the potentially harmful effects of inter-ethnic competition: arrangements which proliferate the points of power “so as to take the heat off a single focal point”, such as a constitutional separation of powers or federalism; devolution or ethnically-reserved offices to foster intra-ethnic conflict at the local level; public policies which encourage the growth of less damaging ‘cross-cutting cleavages’, such as class identification, to act as counterweights to ethnic identification; and measures which serve to reduce inter-ethnic inequalities and disparities “so that dissatisfaction declines” (*Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, 597-600).

21 Reilly, *Democracy in Divided Societies*, 11.


23 See Reilly, *Democracy in Divided Societies*.


27 Lijphart, ‘Self-determination versus Pre-determination’.


32 At the time of writing there were eight single-member constituencies in Cambodia, up from six in 1993.


36 Hicken, ‘Party Fabrication?’.


