

***Populism in Southeast Asia*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 77 pages. ISBN 9781108459105. Paperback, 18 USD. Paul D. Kenny. 2019.**

The rise of contemporary populism across different regions in the world has spurred comparative studies and competing conceptualizations of populism. But, according to Paul Kenny, the conceptual debate on populism has largely missed engaging the multiple cases of populist leaders that have sprung in post-authoritarian Southeast Asian countries—particularly Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand. Because of this, much of the arguments explaining the rise of populist movements and leaders in the literature do not fit the context by which leaders like Rodrigo Duterte were able to successfully capture positions of power in Southeast Asia. Premised on the organizational approach on conceptualizing populism, *Populism in Southeast Asia* explores the various factors in the structure of political parties that allow populist mobilization to thrive in the three countries. Drawing on the insights of the cases of Yudhoyono in Indonesia, Duterte in the Philippines, and Thaksin in Thailand among others, it attempts to explain the success of populism in the region. The succeeding paragraphs of this review summarize the contents of the six-chapter book. After this, the review proceeds to critically engage the book's contents by discussing the strengths and weaknesses of Kenny's main contentions.

*Populism in Southeast Asia* is divided into six sections. The first section introduces the reader to the topic of populism and its relevance to Southeast Asia. The second section is devoted to Kenny's conceptualization of populism in the region and traces the logical process that led him to arrive at that definition. Section 3 identifies the causes of populism in Southeast Asia and discusses how other definitions cannot adequately identify the prevalence of populism in the region. Section 4

is devoted to a historical analysis of how the political and economic factors that made the region conducive to populism arose. In the penultimate section, Section 5, Kenny analyzes how prevalent populism is in the region by critically analyzing the cases of contemporary leaders in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand. The final section serves as a conclusion to the book, where Kenny tackles the debate of whether or not populism is detrimental to democratic institutions.

In the first two parts of this book, Kenny begins his conceptualization by establishing that populism is “the charismatic mobilization of a mass movement in pursuit of political power” (p. 5). He expounds by arguing that populist mobilization “thrives where ties between voters and either bureaucratic or clientelistic parties do not exist or have decayed” (p. 3). Since populists employ *direct* mobilization of their audience through the various public performances in their repertoire, voters become more susceptible to this mobilization strategy when they have no pre-existing strong relations to any political party. In fact, voters in Southeast Asia have been more strongly tied to local political leaders, making the prevailing party structures in Southeast Asian democracies more clientelistic. Owing to their charismatic authority, populist authority is not bound by any institutionalized rules that are characteristic of bureaucratic parties, but instead aims to create direct relations to their supporters and eventually lead a mass movement driven by (and to articulate) the popular will. For Kenny, this type of charismatic mobilization is what will qualify political leaders as populists.

Kenny begins the third part of this book by arguing how current explanations in the literature—seven in particular—do not sufficiently explain the specific nuances of populist success in the region. Particularly, the current theories fail to explain why weak party structures have motivated the rise of populism. By doing this, Kenny lays down the case for the need for an intra-regional explanation of the success of populist mobilization. Kenny proceeds to argue that populism best thrives in environments where (1) party structures have become more decentralized and dependent on local patronage, and (2) greater autonomy of local leaders (“brokers”) to choose particular patrons in

the national level weakens ties between national parties and their voting base. In these contexts, populist mobilization becomes a low-cost alternative to attempts to bureaucratize or centralize existing party systems.

The fourth section of this book is devoted to analyzing how the historical experiences of the three Southeast Asian countries in developing the nature of its political parties led to each country's party system being fragmented and clientelistic. In the colonial period, the lack of economic modernization inhibited the growth of mass-based organizations and the level of political participation of local elites in colonial-era governments either led to the prevalence of the fragmented and clientelistic parties or, in the worst case, inhibited the strength of democratic institutions themselves. The post-war period saw the Philippines and Indonesia at the hands of both populist leaders (Magsaysay and Sukarno) and authoritarian dictators (Marcos and Suharto). Thailand would also have its share of authoritarianism experiences—a military dictatorship was put in place by the Thai monarchy to quell student mass movements; when political parties were allowed to form in the 1990s, these parties were mostly a coalition of local patronage-holding political leaders. In summing up, the fragmented nature of party systems in the region can be owed to three reasons: decentralized electoral institutions, the national political economy, and the colonial/imperial experiences of each country. This explanation shows how populism's success in Southeast Asia is owed not only to the available political opportunities to prospective politicians, but also to the structural factors produced by centuries of institution-building.

After establishing the historical background of the culture of fragmented parties in the three countries, Kenny proceeds to examine more recent populist leaders in the region—Duterte, Yudhoyono, and Thaksin—in the fifth section. Kenny specifically highlights how each of these leaders' success can be traced to (1) the institutional weaknesses of national party systems and (2) the use of direct and unmediated relationships to their prospective bases of support in order to strengthen their appeal and win their respective public offices. The section discusses how these two criteria manifested themselves in each country, thereby

strengthening Kenny's main claim that populism has succeeded in similar circumstances in Southeast Asia.

In concluding this book, Kenny engaged on the issue of whether or not populism has weakened democracy in Southeast Asia. Kenny is sympathetic toward the argument that populism has been detrimental to democratic institutions in the region, noting that populists' inclination to pursue direct relations with their supporters come at the expense of eroding institutions intended to serve as intermediaries, such as political parties and mass media. He continues by saying that Southeast Asia highlights a tension between populism, patronage democracy, and military authoritarianism—increasing the cost for any liberal democrat to pursue any corrective measures to strengthen national democratic institutions. Hence, Kenny believes that “populism is as much as a *symptom* as a *cause* of weak democracy” (p. 8). Highlighting the challenges faced by non-populists to co-opt the popular and institutional support held by populists is vital in concluding this book since it further solidifies the claim that populism has flourished in the region for so long.

The strength of the book lies in its clarity and comprehensiveness. Each section is devoted to a discussion that is important in Kenny's resulting conceptualization of populism in Southeast Asia. Moreover, he clearly lays out the case as to why a regional description of populism is needed—owing to the inability of current definitions to (as Kenny suggests) sufficiently describe the successes of populist campaigns in Southeast Asia. Kenny likewise makes no pretense that his definition of populism is meant to be applied to other regions but is still an important contribution to the literature since this book helps elucidate the success of some of the most interesting cases of the global trend of populism in recent years. However, as discussed later, a more critical reading of Kenny's account may lead readers to think that his arguments may not be as compelling as it seems.

The other strength of this book lies in the fact that it not only provides a strong theoretical claim for populist success—this book can also be a springboard to research on populist resistance. The conceptualization in the book is a good starting ground on how

opposition to populism fares in the region. While Kenny has already suggested that the opposition is in a very difficult position in challenging incumbent populists, examining the success of counter-populist movements in the region, especially in the face of elections in the Philippines and Thailand can provide how sustainable the hold of populists to mobilize their base of support can be. However, as will be explained below, Kenny might be too pessimistic about non-populist politicians in the region.

Yet while the book is generally effective in laying down its arguments in favor of its chosen definition, there are some parts of the discussion that could have been better addressed. First, Kenny does not expand on how the cases of the three countries fit into the general experiences of the whole region. The analysis on his three chosen countries are very comprehensive, but the analysis is silent on how similar or different the experiences of the three countries are compared to the entire region. This could leave readers asking whether or not populism has not been successful in other Southeast Asian countries, which seems not to be the case given the rise of other populists in the region such as Mahathir of Malaysia.

Second, while Kenny devotes much explanation on the structural reasons of populism's success in the region, sifting through these political fundamentals may not be so important as it may seem. This weakness is highlighted when the reader finds out that there seems to be no clear explanation as to why non-populists are still able to successfully mobilize support despite Kenny arguing that Southeast Asia is a fertile ground for populist mobilization. Kenny displays a pessimistic view of opposition to populist leaders, but non-populists have also fared well in the region. For instance, Benigno Aquino III was able to win the Philippine presidency in 2010 despite running against pro-poor populist candidates such as Joseph Estrada and Manuel Villar. Aquino was able to attain the broadest support in that election given the weak party structures in the Philippines despite not being a populist. That would suggest that populism's success in Southeast Asia is not contingent on the fundamentals of its political party systems that Kenny discussed, but exclusively contingent on the level of *direct charismatic mobilization*

of populist leaders. Without any clarification from Kenny, this could weaken his two main rationales of writing this book: (1) the need to look at populism in the structuralist/organizational perspective, and (2) his insistence on an intra-regional theory on the success of populist political campaigns.

Third, Kenny concedes that his account on Southeast Asian populism generally identifies what macro-level indicators allow populism to flourish in the region and leaves out what individual supporters might be looking for in populist leaders at the micro-level. However, in making that concession, Kenny merely attributes this inability to a lack of empirical data at the individual level without arguing why a lack of micro-level discussion does not delegitimize the resulting conceptualization of populism in Southeast Asia. While it is not fatal to Kenny's discussion, researchers pursuing topics on micro-level factors resulting in the success of populist movements may find this as an opportunity to further improve the conceptualization laid out in the book.

Finally, in succeeding sections of the book, Kenny makes an allusion to *full* and *partial* or *moderate* populists without describing how his definition allows the description of populist leaders in a spectrum. He does not discuss the differences in the mobilization success of a full populist like Duterte and a moderate populist like Jokowi, nor does he set any other standard on what separates these leaders to make one *more* populist than the other or explaining why making such distinction is necessary. Again, this is not a fatal blind spot of the book as Kenny explains that at the baseline, his definition can sufficiently explain the rise of both full and partial populists in the region.

Mapping out the success of populist campaigns in Southeast Asia is an important piece in the puzzle of understanding the success of populist movements worldwide. Paul Kenny makes an effective attempt at placing that piece in the puzzle. *Populism in Southeast Asia* provides a succinct yet comprehensive account of historical, socio-political, and economic factors that have led populism to blossom in the region. Despite this review highlighting a few weaknesses of Kenny's approach, his definition of populism is still a useful empirical conceptualization that scholars

of populism should engage with, especially those who are interested in studying the phenomenon's success in Southeast Asia. Moreover, *Populism in Southeast Asia* is without a doubt an effective reading material for anyone interested in understanding populism.

Reviewed by Jose Miguelito Enriquez  
*Department of Social Sciences*  
*University of the Philippines Manila*  
*Correspondence email: jgenriquez1@up.edu.ph*