

Andreas Ufen: The Institutionalisation of Political Parties in Southeast Asia

Of the eleven Southeast Asian countries only Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines may be regarded as functioning democracies, with Indonesia's political parties showing the highest degree of institutionalisation. However, even there, institutionalisation is low and the political parties increasingly resemble clientelist groups that are comparable to those prevailing in Thailand and the Philippines. In 1998, Rüland referred to the parties there as 'floating parties'. The following paper investigates various institutionalisation patterns in the three countries named above.

Since Suharto resigned in 1998, more than 200 new political parties have developed in Indonesia, of which 24 were admitted to the national elections of 2004. Of the ten biggest political parties, six are Muslim and four secularist, which describes the country's major lines of conflict, locally called cleavages. The degree to which the political parties are institutionalised differs individually: The current ruling party, Golkar, which is well organised even at the lowest levels of administration and has considerable funds at its disposal, is strongly institutionalised. Less institutionalised, on the other hand, are the PPP and the PDI-I, which constituted a moderate opposition in the nineties but are now unstructured at their lower levels and financially as weak as ever.

Islamic or Islamist political parties show a greater degree of societal integration. The PKB, the party of the fourth Indonesian president, Abdurrahman Wahid, emerged from the NU, the biggest Muslim organisation with an official membership of 40 million. As a political organisation, the PKB is loosely structured; in view of the fact that it is tied to a specific milieu, however, its degree of institutionalisation is high. The same holds true for the second biggest Muslim party, the PAN, which is close to the large Islamic organisation Muhammadiyah. The PAN is organised in a more professional way than the PKB, its members being mainly intellectuals. The Partai Demokrat (PD) is a young political party which has hardly any programme or structure. The similarly young Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), on the other hand, is an efficiently organised Islamist cadre party with a strict party discipline.

Almost all political parties have their headquarters in Jakarta. In their crackdown on dissenters, the right to dismiss parliamentarians which was reintroduced in 2002 serves as an efficient tool. Internal fights between party factions are sometimes resolved in defiance of party statutes that, by the way, are not explicitly defined. All Indonesian political parties rely to a large extent on the support of private sponsors, which permits well-heeled businessmen to influence the work of the political parties. This also explains why there are so many clientelist structures that are often based on money alone.

Many political parties in the Philippines and Thailand are less institutionalised than those in Indonesia, where political parties tend to be badly organised and programmatically weak but better institutionalised in terms of their links to mass organisations and/or social milieus. Philippine political parties are noted for a lack of party programmes, rotating memberships, and a tradition of forming short-term coalitions.

The Philippine party landscape itself is confusing: There are numerous political parties that have meaningless names and are often only a few years old. The centuries-old dominance of a few families led to a social structure which serves as one explanation for the fluidity of today's parties.

From 1907 to 1947, the country was ruled by the clientelist Nacionalista Party (NP). After independence, the NP competed with the Liberal Party (LP) which had emerged from its own midst with a profile hardly differing from that of the NP. The winner of the manipulated elections of 1978 was Marcos' party, the KBL. Only after its democratisation in 1986 did the Philippine party landscape acquire a new profile, when the Marcos party contrasted more strongly with the political parties around Corazon Aquino.

Scientists tend to argue that fundamental political relationships are based on dyadic, vertical relations between patrons and clients. However, this approach is questionable since it induces us to interpret such power relationships too positively.

Most of the Philippines' political parties were founded by presidential candidates and/or are under their command – such as the PDP under Aquino, the Laban ng Makabayang Masang Pilipino under Estrada, and the Lakas under Ramos and Macapagal-Arroyo. Having won an election, these parties tend to attract members from other parties. In Lakas-NUCD-UMDP-KAMPI, for example, the members of four political parties are amalgamated.

What is also special about the Philippine political parties is the phenomenon of multiple membership which reveals, among other things, the politicians' weak attachment to their parties. Here, the Philippines' current president, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, may serve as an example: Starting off as one of the founding members of the KAMPI, she recently stood for the Lakas-NUCD and is now honorary chairwoman of the Liberal Party. One of the reasons for party switching and coalition changes are the pork barrels – special funds that are in the hands of the president and may be used for cultivating a party's internal networks.

Apart from that, political parties in the Philippines are not long-lived: Prior to elections, they function as political machines founded and controlled by presidential candidates; in the day-to-day life of parliament, they are hardly more than MP pressure groups.

In Thailand, the degree to which political parties are institutionalised is also mostly low. Especially in recent years, numerous political parties disappeared from the political stage. The party system reflects societal divisions only to some extent, and the polarisation of 1992 between political parties that favour democracy and those that focus on maintaining the status quo is no longer there. Today's political parties are hardly rooted in society, and especially outside Bangkok, their organisation is weak. While Philippine politicians switch parties, those in Thailand are elected because of their networks, party affiliations being almost uninteresting.

Despite their low degree of institutionalisation, there are differences between the political parties. Thus, for example, the Chart Thai, which was founded in 1974, is rated as 'law and order' party which, in its time, supported Surinda and took part in quelling demonstrations. In 1997, Thaksin left the Palang Dharma Party which was founded in 1988 by Bangkok's governor, the religious ascetic Chamlong, who gave the party its reputation of being 'clean'. The only party with a longer tradition is the Democrat Party which was founded in 1946. Having supported the student protests of 1973 and the fight against Suchinda later on, it is considered the party with the highest degree of institutionalisation in Thailand.

As early as 1997, there were plans to counteract the weak institutionalisation of the Thai political parties by amending the constitution. Related measures targeted instability, the deep fragmentation of the party system, and other matters. If we look at the elections of 2001 and 2005, however, the effect of the reform bills appears ambivalent: Having 'bought' numerous

politicians and local leaders, the media mogul, Thaksin Shinawatra, and his party, the Thai Rak Thai (TRT), managed to win 248 out of 500 seats in the lower house elections of 2001.

The TRT, which pays its MPs an additional salary, is financed by Thaksin and his wife. Nevertheless, this party, which also won the elections of 2005, is only weakly institutionalised. The biggest of its twelve current factions consists of as many as 70 MPs; it is led by Snoh Thientong of the New Aspiration Party. When the military revolted in April 2006, dissolving the two parliaments and ousting the Thaksin government, the fragility of Thailand's current party system became apparent once again.

Now, which factors encourage or hamper the institutionalisation of political parties? A look at Southeast Asia hardly allows us to draw conclusions about the influence of political institutions: It seems that in the Philippines, presidentialism encourages the establishment of 'election machines'. In Indonesia, ruling and opposition parties even form alliances in between presidential election rounds. And in Thailand, the structural deficits of the parliamentary system resemble those in the Philippines. What seems to be even more important than the political institutions is the electoral system. However, the following factors are important as well: The way in which social conflicts are being translated into the party system, the political and economic environment of the political parties themselves, the influence of local and regional elites, the specific circumstances of state formation and, although differing in form, religion as a political ideology. However, the question about the degree to which these factors influence the institutionalisation of political parties in each country has not been answered yet.