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## **Southeast Asia's Subversive Voters: A Philippine Perspective**

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# Professorial Address

MARK R. THOMPSON

## Southeast Asia's Subversive Voters A Philippine Perspective

In the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries poor people's voting behavior has been subversive of elite interests, causing the upper classes to be skeptical of votes cast by the poor and to "educate" them on the "proper" exercise of suffrage. But voting by the poor can be understood within a "moral economy" framework in which communal interests transcend utilitarian calculations. Populist politicians (Joseph Estrada in the Philippines and Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand) have brought localist voting patterns to the national level, resulting in adverse reactions: an elite-led insurrection ousted Estrada in 2001, while the Thai military staged the coup of 2014 to break the electoral bond between pro-Thaksin politicians and the poor.

**KEYWORDS: ELECTIONS • POOR VOTERS • VOTER EDUCATION • POPULISM • SOUTHEAST ASIA**

How can voting possibly be subversive? Voting is the heart of what we have come to call democratic rule, a core civic duty. “Making democracy work” involves citizens taking their duties as “shareholders” in the political system seriously. Voters choose among competing politicians, upholding the principle of political choice and popular empowerment through the very act of entering the voting booth and casting their ballots. No voting, no democracy.<sup>1</sup> To paraphrase Shakespeare, would not voting by any other name smell as democratically sweet?

Yet, for many scholars, voting is a rather smelly business. Unconfirmed (un)academic gossip has it that during a 1990s conference on Southeast Asian politics a prominent scholar of the region’s politics compared voting to a trip to the toilet—the voter was alone and engaged in a dirty business that needed to be hidden away, with voters seldom emerging from the voting booth smelling of roses. Benedict O’G. Anderson (1996, 14) has argued that voting is “the only political act imaginable in perfect solitude . . . the polar opposite of other forms of personal political participation.” The “logic of electoralism” is thus “domestication: distancing, punctuating, isolating.” It confines “active and regular participation specialists—professional politicians—who not only have a strong interest in their institutionalized oligopoly” but are also generally drawn from the middle classes and the elites (ibid.).

It is common for scholars of the Philippines, and Southeast Asia generally, to speak of (when they are not openly denouncing) ties between voter clients and elite patrons in terms of clientelism, or worse, the simple buying of poor peoples’ votes. Voting has been put at the front and center of a growing discussion of “money politics,” with voters either bought or heavily influenced by particularistic political ties to politicians (Aspinall 2015a). Vote buying is only the most extreme form of political corruption in this view, with voters not engaging in policy issues but only looking for some form of short-term payoff, direct or indirect. It is not uncommon for scholars to conclude that voting can be corrupting, particularly for poor voters, contributing to their disempowerment. Power corrupts the powerful, but voting appears to corrupt the powerless.

Such critiques have been a leitmotiv of discussions of electoralism since the mid-nineteenth century in the US when political “bossism” became rampant in large US cities (the locus classicus is Banfield and Wilson 1963; for a revisionist view see Golway 2014). Critiques of vote buying in the US

were echoed in other electoral democracies such as in the United Kingdom (Stokes 2011). Carl Schmitt (1923/1996), in his (in)famous critique of parliamentarianism during the interwar German Weimar Republic, argued that voters elected parliamentarians who were without principles, who governed according to corrupt compromises reached in proverbial smoke-filled rooms. For Schmitt (1970, 237), who later became a Nazi party member, “true democracy” could not be achieved with elections, but only through a strong leader acclaimed by “the people,” leading to the emergence of an “identity of the rulers and the ruled.”<sup>2</sup>

This Rousseauian idea of direct democracy involving the leader’s intuiting the *volonté générale* has long lurked behind critiques of electoral democracy, beginning with the words of the great *Genevois* himself. Jean Jacques Rousseau (1913, 74) in *Du contrat social* famously scoffed thus about voting in England: “The people of England regards itself as free; but it is grossly mistaken; it is free only during the election of members of parliament. As soon as they are elected, slavery overtakes it, and it is nothing.”

Or is it perhaps the other way around? Many of Southeast Asia’s voters are poor, some desperately so. Given their poverty and everyday powerlessness, is not voting a form of temporary empowerment? When studying a village in eastern Nueva Ecija province in the Philippines during the early martial law period, anthropologist Willem Wolters (1983) discovered how much ordinary people missed voting in competitive elections under the “New Society” authoritarian rule of Ferdinand E. Marcos. What academics and Philippine elites saw as corrupting patronage distribution at election time, local peasants saw as a rare opportunity to benefit from redistribution from the rich to the poor.

Studies of voting in India have found that voters treasure not just the material rewards for their communities linked to elections but also the idea of citizenship that voting expresses. Mukulika Banerjee (2007) goes so far as to describe the role elections play in poor people’s lives in India as “sacrosanct,” with voters taking the act of voting seriously and responsibly. In the Philippines, a Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (2004) article summarized the conclusions of a major study of Philippine elections by the Ateneo de Manila University’s Institute of Philippine Culture (IPC 2005) as “the poor voter is a thinking voter.”

In this professorial address, I argue that poor people’s voting behavior is often subversive of elite interests and expectations, which is one (usually

unstated) reason why the upper classes are so skeptical of votes cast by the less well off. I will examine, first, how voters have mobilized against dictatorships via elections in the Philippines and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. If dictators monopolize power and much wealth, why was it that poor voters could not be bought off (or at least intimidated by “guns and goons”)? Next I turn to the way “elite guardians” in newly restored electoral democracies attempt to “educate” poor voters to exercise their right to suffrage “properly” and how it is resisted by the disadvantaged who consider it condescending. I suggest instead that the voting behavior of the poor can be better understood within a framework that I term the “moral economy” of elections. There is a sense of community that motivates poor voters when they consider whom to vote for that transcends utilitarian calculations. Finally, I examine the widespread, and thus “subversive,” support by poor voters for “populist” politicians: Joseph E. Estrada in the Philippines and Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand. The poor’s support for Estrada and Thaksin drew the wrath of elites, who reacted by launching “people power coups,” upper-class demonstrations backed by the military in the Philippines (2001) and Thailand (2006, 2008, and 2014). In the Thai case, the return to authoritarian rule in 2014 shows how elites deem the strong electoral connection between populist politicians and the poor electorate as subversive.

### **Voters against Dictators**

The “corruption-of-poor-voters-by-unscrupulous-politicians” argument tends to ignore the fact that when authoritarian rulers “steal” elections that they would otherwise lose the result is often mass mobilization against dictatorship. As Edward Herman and Frank Brodhead (1984) argued about elections in El Salvador, among other cases, such exercises are often demonstration elections for external actors (particularly the US). Although usually not overly concerned about domestic legitimacy, authoritarian rulers still need voters to play their supportive “role.” If dictators are so rich and powerful, how can they possibly lose elections in countries where the majority of voters are poor? Even if patronage distribution happens to be in short supply, electoral terror by dictators, or simply widespread vote fraud, could surely make up the difference. Yet massive antiregime protests have broken out in several countries around the world after electoral authoritarian rulers engaged in blatant electoral manipulation and have “stolen” elections (Kuntz and Thompson 2009). An “imagined community” of robbed voters

joins opposition activists and regime turncoats to overthrow a dictatorship discredited by popular balloting, even though theories of clientelism would suggest that authoritarian rulers should have a massive advantage in terms of what Filipinos sadly term the Three Gs: Guns, Goons, and Gold. Stolen elections mobilize ordinary citizens, strengthen the opposition, and divide the regime, thus helping overcome significant barriers to collective revolutionary action. Stolen elections are triggering events that suddenly transform the political situation into a favorable one for mass mobilization and the overthrow of a dictatorship.

In the Philippines Ferdinand E. Marcos was challenged during the first major elections held under martial law, the 1978 Batasang Pambansa (legislative) polls. In Cebu a small opposition party, PUSYON BISAYA, surprised many observers by winning several seats. In Metro Manila old-guard opposition forces, in alliance with left forces, attracted strong voter support, “losing” only after they were cheated. Despite coming up short in the (fraudulent) counting, the opposition achieved a temporary breakthrough in the country’s capital through a massive “noise barrage” of pot banging and political slogans. There was also protest (that led to the arrest of several oppositionists) after the election results were manipulated (Thompson 1995, ch. 4). Philippine voters, once they again had the chance to vote after the declaration of martial law, relished the opportunity to cast their ballots against the dictatorship.

The assassination of opposition leader Benigno “Ninoy” S. Aquino Jr. as he was attempting to return to the Philippines from exile to the US in August 1983 created a mass protest movement in the Philippines. By the end of 1983 it had become obvious that Marcos was neither planning to resign as demanded by opposition demonstrators nor was he about to be toppled by ongoing demonstrations. Opposition forces split over the issue of whether to participate in the 1984 Batasang Pambansa elections, with those groups that did take part doing better than anticipated, although still only representing a minority in parliament.

Marcos’s call for “snap” presidential elections for February 1986, largely to placate his wavering US ally, proved a major miscalculation. The opposition electoral camp was emboldened. It united behind the candidacy of Corazon “Cory” C. Aquino, who promised to carry on her “martyred” husband’s antidictatorship cause and appeared to symbolize a selfless commitment to restoring democracy. Although she herself was from one of

the richest landowning families in the Philippines and her campaign was run by her family and elite friends, she won voter support across class lines. A mediocre speaker, Aquino still drew huge crowds in urban and rural areas throughout the country; these crowds often waited hours, sometimes during downpours, for her usually delayed campaign appearances. She recounted her and her husband's suffering, which she linked to the general oppression of the regime and the need to restore human rights and democracy. The opposition revived an old slogan: *Tanggapin ang pera, ilagay sa bulsa, pero bumoto sa kursonada* (Take the money [offered by pro-Marcos politicians], pocket it, but vote for the one you like). Marcos might have had most of the money, but the opposition had morality on its side.

The opposition revived the National Movement for Free Elections, or Namfrel, to document inevitable electoral fraud (Hedman 1999). Despite Marcos's dominance of media coverage, intimidation of opposition activists (with a number of high-profile killings), and massive use of government resources, Namfrel estimated that Cory Aquino had in fact won the 1986 election by a margin of 52 percent to 48 percent against Marcos. This was crucial in Aquino's claim that Marcos had stolen the election and that therefore he should resign. By participating in elections the Aquino-led opposition gained control of the movement against Marcos, outmaneuvering both the communists as well as military rebels led by Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile and later joined by Deputy Armed Forces Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. Fidel V. Ramos, who had also been secretly organizing against Marcos.

When the coup plot by the military rebels was discovered, their leaders, Enrile and Ramos, held a press conference at Camp Aguinaldo announcing they were resigning from the Marcos government. The streets around the camp remained empty for several hours, as these military men had long been closely associated with Marcos. Only when Aquino ally Manila Archbishop Jaime Cardinal Sin and Agapito Aquino, Aquino's brother-in-law, broadcast their support on an opposition radio station, Radio Veritas, later that evening did large numbers of people begin to gather in front of the rebel-held camp. The crowd—estimated to have been between 1 and 2 million people at peak morning periods during the four days of People Power—blocked soldiers sent by Marcos from attacking, with nuns handing flowers to government tank commanders to calm frayed nerves. Seeing where the allegiance of the masses lay, Enrile had little choice

but to endorse the new Philippine leader, Cory Aquino. The electoral campaign and “People Power” after the stolen elections were crucial in defeating the Marcos dictatorship.

Filomeno Aguilar Jr. (2007, 79) employs a cockfight metaphor, commonly used in Philippine popular culture to describe elections, to assess the impact of the “snap” polls this way:

After many years, the country had its first credible match involving two worthy contenders. Marcos was the ‘red’ cock fighting against the ‘yellow’ hen that was Cory Aquino. Obviously, the latter was the favorite underdog, and many citizens made a concerted effort to prevent a fraudulent result. When it became apparent that the election had been stolen . . . the extreme frustration over an imminent underdog victory fueled the popular sentiment that crystallized into People Power. The spectators in the cockpit, as it were, became so fed up that they left the bleachers and mobbed the arena.

Cory Aquino and her “yellow” elite supporters later interpreted EDSA as “a miracle,” a divinely sanctioned popular uprising against an evil dictator in order to reestablish a righteous democracy. Lisandro Claudio (2013) has pointed out that this elitist narrative denies agency to the poor masses crucial to the success of People Power. One poor EDSA demonstrator told Michael Pinches (1987, 101): “At EDSA rich and poor came together but now it is like it was before—they can’t be bothered with us.” Both as voters and as demonstrators, the poor majority of Filipinos subverted the Marcos dictatorship and brought Cory Aquino to power, enabling a democratic transition, even if “yellow” elites soon tried to play down the poor's significance.

In Myanmar (then known as Burma), the opposition National League for Democracy triumphed in the 1990 elections (which followed the brutal crackdown on prodemocracy demonstrations in 1988). Having repressed demonstrations, the country's military rulers mistakenly believed they could control the electoral process as well. Despite detaining major opposition candidates (including its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi), the regime was stunned by the result, with the opposition winning nearly 60 percent of the vote and 80 percent of the seats in parliament and the promilitary national unity party receiving 20 percent of the vote but only 2 percent of the seats. The

military refused to recognize the results and convene parliament, and instead imprisoned dozens of opposition parliamentarians, with many others fleeing abroad (Human Rights Watch 2010). The military junta did feel compelled to commit to a “Road Map to Disciplined Democracy” that involved writing a new constitution, approved in a 2008 referendum, and holding tightly controlled elections in 2010, which the opposition boycotted. The reasons for the liberalization of military rule after 2011 are complex (Bünte 2013; Callahan 2012; Huang 2013), but one factor was that despite repression the opposition, electorally legitimated since 1990, never lost popular support, with Aung San Suu Kyi symbolizing the popular will despite spending more than two decades under house arrest. When free and fair elections were finally held in 2015, the result was virtually the same as twenty-five years earlier, the opposition taking just under 80 percent of the elected seats. As of this writing, the opposition controls parliament and has elected a president, Htin Kyaw, a close ally of Suu Kyi. Myanmar’s subversive voters emerged from a quarter of a century of repressive military rule to replicate their earlier defiant vote in favor of the opposition.

In Malaysia the 2013 national elections, in which the opposition won more votes but fewer seats in a gerrymandered election, did not lead to the defeat of the ruling United Malay National Organization (UMNO), whose “implausibly claimed victory” strained its legitimacy (Case 2014). Meredith Weiss (2013, 2016), who studies “money politics,” pointed to the role UMNO’s huge largesse to voters played in the balloting and in authoritarian resilience in Malaysia. But it does not explain why the majority of Malaysians, and a significant plurality of Malays, voted against the ruling party and for opposition parties. Many of the poor apparently could not simply be bought off by UMNO. It was largely due to this electoral setback that the UMNO regime had become more vulnerable than at any time since the 1969 Emergency, which was also sparked by opposition electoral gains. Many voters who felt robbed in this and earlier elections came out in support of the Bersih clean election movement, which represented the most significant political mobilization in Malaysia in nearly two decades.

Even in tightly controlled Singapore, ordinary citizens have been using the ballot box to demonstrate to the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) their growing dissatisfaction with their monopoly on power. Stephan Ortmann (2011) points out that the PAP’s vote share declined significantly in the 2011 parliamentary elections, with the opposition winning a record number of

seats, showing that there had been “meaningful contestation for ruling power for the first time” in Singapore’s recent history. Although the PAP performed better in the 2015 elections, in large part due to the nostalgia following the death of the country’s founding father, Lee Kuan Yew, and the fiftieth-anniversary celebrations of the city-state’s existence, the regime’s hegemony had been broken through by the willingness of ordinary (particularly working class) Singaporeans to vote for the opposition—despite PAP threats to punish opposition constituents in terms of public service delivery. In the past the PAP had responded bitterly to such mass-based opposition, claiming voters were “immature and ungrateful for the decades of progress” so benevolently brought to them by the PAP (Haas 1999, 174). By taking voting (too) seriously, ordinary voters who use elections as opportunities to “subvert” such regimes have endangered electoral authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia.

### **Elite Guardians of Democracy**

After democratization, self-proclaimed “elite guardians” in Southeast Asia did not waste time trying to “instruct” poor voters how to behave properly in the region’s new democracies. Claiming to be motivated by civic duty, voter education campaigners are often biased against the poor, stereotyping them as easily corrupted by unscrupulous politicians. Frederic Charles Schaffer (2005) describes how “election watchdog groups, public-minded corporations, government election bodies, reformist political parties, and other civic educators” attempt to “clean up dirty electoral practices” through a “disciplinary component” designed to “train voters to act ‘correctly’” through voter education programs.

Schaffer argues that the Philippines is a particularly interesting example of this phenomenon because of the emphasis that Filipino elites place on civic education of poor voters as the key to achieving a “mature” democracy. The Catholic Church and big business (particularly the Makati Business Club) have played the leading role in funding and organizing these voter education drives. “Civic educators” are mostly drawn from the upper and middle classes “who find elections to be a source of both frustration and anxiety” because they fear that poor voters are easily swayed by “inept, depraved, and/or corrupt” politicians, including movie actor politicians. (A derogatory expression used by the upper classes to describe this phenomenon among poor voters is *bobotante*, which combines *bobo*, stupid, with voter, *botante*.) Thus “many in the middle and upper classes are left with a feeling



of electoral powerlessness” because as a minority (with the “ABC” upper and middle classes making up only a little over 10 percent of the electorate) they cannot determine election outcomes (ibid.).

Civic-minded voter education activists in and outside of government took a similar attitude in Thailand. Pitch Pongsawat (2007) described the discourse of the Electoral Commission of Thailand (ECT), which was established in the “reformist” 1997 constitution, and the Poll Watch Committee, a volunteer electoral watchdog, as presenting electoral participation to ordinary voters in “a ‘duty’ mode, not in the mode of ‘citizen’s rights.’” The implication, in Pitch’s view, is that elections were turned into a “ritual of imposing political order to perpetuate state power, rather than a state-led campaign to mobilize people to vote in the name of promoting people’s power to make decisions and take control of the state” (ibid., 99). The ECT’s slogan for the 2001 Thai national elections was “Election is the Duty—Choose the ‘Good’ Person for Parliament,” which drew on a long-standing conservative royalist/nationalist narrative aimed at “corrupt” politicians. Pitch (ibid.) assesses the implications of such sloganeering:

It is interesting that the ECT-led election-cum-democracy campaign to promote democratic elections had, in essence, no democratic content at all. The Election Commission defines a “good” election candidate simply as one who is not corrupt and not a vote buyer; the government’s anti-corruption campaign always presents the corrupt politicians as national traitors . . . Thus, in fact, the ECT does not know how to provide coherent details on how democratic principles can and will fix the corruption issue, beyond the idea and desire that politicians should be a patriot and/or a royalist. The election-cum-democracy campaign was, therefore, a moment when authoritarianism and royal patriotism were presented in the name of democratic promotion. The logic here is both tautological and absurd.

In both the Philippines and Thailand poor voters have developed a very different understanding of elections than their would-be civic educators. Poor voters generally view such voter-education campaigns as insulting, based on stereotypes about the ease of buying the votes of the poor. This can be termed, following Sennet and Cobb’s terminology (1972/1993), “a hidden injury of class.” The poor see electoral politics as a (rare) form of

dignity in their lives. What elites consider irresponsible electoral behavior, the poor view as a legitimate exercise of suffrage, which in turn largely subverts upper-class efforts to “educate” ordinary voters. Michael Connors (2003) has noted that in Thailand voters often have to be paid to attend voter education seminars! This suggests just how cynical the poor often are about such exercises.

In the Philippines sixteen focus-group discussions conducted with informants by the IPC (2005) in urban and rural communities in different parts of the archipelago revealed that upper-class views about ordinary voters are largely based on misconceptions. With results that parallel findings in other developing countries, the poor took their public duty as voters seriously, understanding that campaigns can be manipulated but still seeing elections as an avenue to bring about political change. They took an idealistic view of the leadership qualities they seek in politicians. Although recognizing “the negative aspects of elections” and the dubious character of many politicians, the poor continue to believe in the importance of voting (ibid.).

It turns out that even “vote buying,” so strongly attacked by upper-class civic educators, is more complicated than generally portrayed. A postelection representative survey of 1,200 voters in the 2001 national polls conducted by Pulse Asia showed only 38 percent of poor voters who took money from candidates actually voted for the candidate or groups of candidates who gave it to them. Twenty percent of those voters said they would have voted for the candidate or candidates anyway. Moreover, those who took money from politicians had mixed motives, with less than a third saying they accepted it because they needed it and others saying that they think of it as an obligation by politicians to be generous to their supporters. They described how local politicians give out money as a “handout” with no obligation to vote for the candidate, the money seen as “goodwill” rather than “vote buying” (Schaffer 2005). In a recent survey by Pulse Asia (2013), 22 percent of voters in the 2013 elections were offered money during the campaign. While 57 percent of those offered accepted the payments, only 31 percent actually voted for the “candidate who offered money or material thing[s] in exchange for [their] vote” (ibid.). Such data led Schaffer (ibid., 18) to conclude that

most voters who received money still apparently exercised their freedom of choice . . . . These observations suggest that voter education materials which tell people not to treat their votes like

commodities miss the mark of how most poor voters think of their votes. The resulting friction between reality and representation generates much of the antipathy felt by many poor voters across the nation towards the [voter] education materials.

## A “Moral Economy” of Elections

As part of their strategy of coping with their economic marginalization, the underprivileged view elections from within the mutual exchange networks in which they are embedded. They do not see themselves as “selling their votes” to “corrupt politicians,” but believe they are voting for leaders who will benefit their local communities.

Anyarat Chattharakul (2010) offers a detailed account based on extensive fieldwork in a suburb of Bangkok of the workings of “vote canvassing networks” (*huakhanaen*). Anyarat argues they cannot be viewed through the “narrow lens of ‘vote buying.’” Rather, they are underpinned by long-term relationships, “both hierarchical and horizontal, between the candidate, multi-level canvassers, and voters” (ibid., 68). Taking up a similar theme, Andrew Walker (2008, 101) writes about what he calls the “rural constitution” in a village he studied in northern Thailand, which “provides a basis for judgments about legitimate, and illegitimate, political power in electoral contexts.” He elaborates (ibid., 101–3):

It is embedded in the everyday politics of discussion, gossip and debate about the personal attributes of leaders, resource allocation, development projects and administrative competence. It is an important cultural domain where the everyday politics of village life spills over into the more formal arena of electoral contest. The rural constitution is an unwritten constitution made of numerous informal provisions, but they can be grouped usefully under three main headings: a common preference for local candidates; an expectation that candidates will support their electorate; and an emerging emphasis on strong and transparent administration . . . [I do not] intend to deny that “vote buying” . . . [has] influence on electoral behaviour in . . . rural Thailand. But I do insist that these specific institutions need to be placed in the much broader context of everyday political values.

Students of “clientelist” politics in the Philippines have come to similar conclusions (Landé 1966; Machado 1974; Kerkvliet 1995; Quimpo 2005). The poor are embedded in such voting networks based on kinship, personal ties, and exchange of goods and services with local leaders acting as electoral gatekeepers but also helping their poor clients on an ongoing basis in order to cement the loyalty of their followers (Kerkvliet 1990, 8). Studying a village in central Luzon, Benedict Kerkvliet (ibid., 13) found that lower-class villagers typically put forward the claim that they are entitled to “economic security, a decent living, and personal respect,” which parallels but also exceeds the earlier central demand (backed up by a threat of rebellion) of peasant politics in Southeast Asia that the right to subsistence agriculture be upheld. Although usually no longer in open rebellion, the poor use their votes to make demands on the rich.

The argument here is that the electoral behavior of the poor is informed by a strong sense of communal responsibility that can be termed the “moral economy” of elections.<sup>3</sup> Voting behavior is based more on long-term community interests, less on short-term individual material inducements, than is commonly assumed. Ordinary people do not approach elections simply as “interest maximizers” but rather in terms of long-term bonds involving exchanges between voters and politicians based on trust and respect. In this classic politics of mutuality, “exchanges” with politicians are judged to be right and fair based on the extent to which they correspond to communal norms, what Walker (2008) has termed the “rural constitution.”<sup>4</sup>

Another important aspect in the poor’s voting calculus is their high level of socioeconomic vulnerability. Vote canvassing networks in Thailand or “clientelist” ties in the Philippines provide security to those facing higher risks in life. They turn to politicians they trust and who respect them, seeking not short-term individual gain but longer-term security within their communities (Anyarat 2010).

Given the limited interest of the upper class-centric media and many academics, this local electoral moral economy long remained hidden at the national level. The rich literally shut out such vote-canvassing networks. While ordinary voters tend to live in open (*ban poet*) or semi-open housing, making them accessible to vote canvassers, the wealthy dwell in closed housing (*ban pit*) of guarded condominiums or separate houses not easily accessed by canvassers (ibid., 81–84).



This pattern is part of a phenomenon that Anek Laothamatas (1996) has termed Thailand's "two democracies." The first is the democracy of "opinion leaders" (urban-based middle and upper classes, the mass media, and academics), while the second is the democracy of elections dominated by poorer, provincial voters. Anek suggests that Bangkok's upper classes and their newspaper and electronic media outlets pursue an idealized vision of political parties, which they believe should only pursue programs that advance the national interest (as elites understand it anyway). Urban elites believe "shameful vote buying and perverted electoral behaviour" to be rampant among provincial voters in Thai elections (ibid., also see Callahan 2005). But Anek points out that upper-class critics assume but never prove that the poor sell their votes. Anek (ibid., 202) takes a morally relativist position, suggesting that the "rural interpretation of democracy" is just as "legitimate and rational as that of the urban middle class." A similar point can be made about the Manila-based press in the Philippines and its condescending attitude to rural voters and the "corrupt" politicians they tend to elect. In Anek's terms, poor and elite voters live in different moral universes.

In a study of a Thai province, Yoshinori Nishizaki (2008) examined the image of a leading Thai politician, Banharn Silpa-archa, in his home bailiwick of Suphanburi province. Banharn, who briefly served as prime minister in the mid-1990s, was commonly ridiculed by the Thai upper classes and by many scholars as an uncouth thief, a proverbial "walking ATM who dispenses dirty money to anyone who needs it" (ibid., 435; cf. Nishizaki 2011). But Nishizaki (2007, 360–61) argues that Banharn constructed "moral authority" in his own province that cannot be facilely attributed "to vote-buying, patronage or pork barrelling . . . Suphanburians support him, not because they are coerced or bought, but for the simple reason that that they regard him as a good leader." Ignorance of this different "moral universe" explains why the upper classes are able to maintain a national-level monopoly on electoral morality. By concentrating on the supposed domination of local politics by corrupt politicians—cavalierly dismissed in Thailand with labels such as *jaopho* ("godfather," apparently introduced into Thai after the Hollywood film of that name) politicians or *trapo* in the Philippines ("traditional politicians," a word that also means "dirty rag" in Tagalog) (Ockey 2004, 82; Quimpo 2005)—national elites bring electoralism into disrepute. By contrast, poor voters experience democracy quite differently, voting not out of narrow self-interest but rather for politicians seen to benefit their community.

## Populism and the Nationalization of the Electoral Moral Economy

With the rise of populist politicians Joseph E. Estrada in the Philippines and Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand, the moral economy of elections, previously hidden at the local level, suddenly appeared center stage in both countries. With their charismatic, media-based campaigns, these populist politicians could appeal directly to poorer voters, which also led many local politicians to join their political bandwagon. Both Estrada and Thaksin faced adamant opposition from elites threatened by the class appeals that challenged not just their privileges but also their "moral monopoly" as self-proclaimed guardians of democracy. Unable to weaken these politicians electorally, a coalition of civic activists, communalist elites (the Catholic Church hierarchy in the Philippines, royalists in Thailand), and big business groups supported their unconstitutional overthrow in "people power"-backed coups (2001 against Estrada; 2006, 2008, and 2014 against Thaksin).

In terms of campaign narrative, Estrada promised to help the common *tao* (people) at the expense of the elite. He and his friend and fellow movie star politician Fernando Poe Jr., popularly known as FPJ, who ran for president in 2004, championed the cause of the poor, promising in effect, "I will help you" (Thompson 2010). Early on Estrada stressed he was fighting against long odds to defeat entrenched elites in the Philippines. Estrada and FPJ starred in movies dubbed "proletarian potboilers" because they played downtrodden heroes fighting for their rights against corrupt elites (Hedman 2001). These films won a vast *masa* (i.e., the poor masses) audience drawing on a "familiar trope in Philippine society and cinema—that of the outlaw/criminal/rebel." Through a "dialectic of recognition and appropriation, Estrada or 'Erap'" appears to know "the real people who lived, laboured, and suffered nearby, round the corner" (ibid., 42).

Estrada's slogan, *Erap para sa mahirap* (Erap for the poor), summed up his appeal: his nickname "Erap" is the inverse of *pare* (friend), suggesting Estrada was a friend of the poor. His image as a fighter for the poor in his movies was easily transferred to the political stage. Although Estrada did much more to help the poor than is commonly recognized—particularly in terms of land reform and small-denominated government bonds helping those with limited savings to gain a higher return—he was able to produce few clear pro-poor policy successes in his two and a half years in power (Borras et al. 2007; Estrada 1999; Briones 2014). But Estrada retained the

loyalty of poor voters (as both opinion polls and the pro-Estrada uprising “EDSA Tres” demonstrated) through his politics of dignity in siding with the less advantaged.

For Thaksin such defiance took longer. Only after he came under sustained attack by traditional Thai elites did Thaksin adopt a rhetorically populist stance. However, when Thaksin did begin making an open bid for ordinary voters’ support, he developed a similar storyline. He told ordinary voters, “I belong to you,” and promised to turn “the Will of the People into state policy” (Baker and Pasuk 2008, 68–70).

Whether a movie-star politician like Estrada or an inadvertent populist like Thaksin, by utilizing media appeals to the disadvantaged both politicians were able to tap into the electoral moral economy, but now at the national, not the local, level. No longer were poor voters simply electing “corrupt” politicians at the local level. They were now installing national populist leaders hated and distrusted by elites. Similar to local clientelist politicians, national populist appeals were couched in paternalistic terms, promising to help the underprivileged while strengthening their dignity vis-à-vis the condescending rich. By bringing this once hidden local “moral universe” to nationwide attention, Thaksin was viewed nationally as Banharn had been locally. In the 2001 election, Thaksin promised investment money for Thai villages, credit for poor farmers, and health care at a nominal cost for all Thais. Once in power, Thaksin used state-owned media under his control to launch a weekly radio program to play up his pro-poor activities (*ibid.*, 65).

Thaksin and Estrada’s populism made them targets of heated attacks from traditional elites. In Thailand “yellow shirt” protestors took to the streets shortly after Thaksin’s overwhelming victory in the 2005 elections, accusing the reelected prime minister of massive corruption. Such charges are not new in Thai politics and corruption appears to be widespread. However, it seems unlikely that they were the main reason for the intensity of the largely urban-based upper- and middle-class-based hostility to Thaksin. Calls by elite demonstrators to dismantle the electoral process were revealing: protestors feared the voters who kept electing Thaksin and his allies. Similarly, anti-Estrada demonstrators accused his administration of corruption. While undoubtedly accurate, corruption has not been unusual in Philippine politics (with, for example, the subsequent Arroyo administration matching Estrada peso for peso in the huge illegal gambling industry, which was the ostensible reason for Estrada’s downfall). Like Thaksin, Estrada may have

discredited himself in the eyes of the upper and middle classes, but he did not lose his base of support among the poor. Claims that a pro-Estrada crowd that nearly overthrew his successor, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, a few months later in May 2001 (known as “Edsa Tres”), were “manipulated” by “unscrupulous” politicians ring hollow, given the open elite support for the earlier “Edsa Dos” that overthrew Estrada. Unable to win in the electoral arena dominated by populist politicians and supported by ordinary voters, elites launched military-backed insurrections instead.

## Conclusion

Poor voters commonly subvert elite interests and expectations when they cast their ballots. They also often act contrary to what might be predicted by a “money politics” perspective common in scholarship about elections in the region. Dictators have a virtual monopoly on “guns, goons, and gold”—yet they have been challenged electorally in several Southeast Asian countries. While in Malaysia and Singapore electoral authoritarian regimes continue to cling to power despite ample evidence of voter anger, in the Philippines “robbed” voters mobilized against the Marcos dictatorship after the manipulation of the “snap” presidential election in 1986 to overthrow it in People Power protests. After the restoration of electoral democracy, self-appointed elite electoral “guardians” in the Philippines and Thailand conducted nationwide voter education campaigns to convince “ignorant” poor voters not to vote for “corrupt and irresponsible” politicians. But such campaigns were condescending, speaking of voting as one of the poor’s “duties,” not as a major part of their citizen responsibilities that studies in the Philippines (IPC 2005; Aguilar 2007) and elsewhere such as India (Banerjee 2007) show is how the poor themselves view voting. Aguilar (2007, 72) points out that Philippine elections “are hugely popular, taken seriously, and draw very high (80–85 percent) participation rates.” Recent studies in the Philippines have also pointed to how the extent of “vote buying” is overestimated and its significance overstated (Schaffer 2005; Pulse Asia 2013). The poor’s voting behavior can be better understood within a framework that can be termed the moral economy of elections in which poor voters cast their ballots based on communalist considerations (“who will help our village or area”) and not simply individual benefit (“what’s in it for me?”). This sense of mutuality cultivated by poor voters when deciding how to vote transcends mere utilitarian calculations, as a large literature

on vote canvassing networks in Thailand and patron–client politics in the Philippines demonstrates.

Worse than the poor's support of "local champions," considered by elites as corrupt politicians, were national populist politicians whom "subversive" poor voters supported in droves. Estrada in the Philippines and Thaksin in Thailand in a sense "nationalized" this electoral "moral economy" by using the media to make promises to help the poor. They both became genuinely popular because of their respectful attitude toward the poor and/or the pro-poor programs they implemented. Under the pretext of corruption charges, elites launched "people power coups" backed by the military against Estrada in the Philippines in 2001 and repeatedly against Thaksin and his successors in Thailand in 2006, 2008, and most recently in May 2014. In the Thai case, the return to authoritarian rule in 2014 can be understood largely as a reaction to the seemingly unbreakable electoral connection between pro-Thaksin politicians and the poor electorate. In Southeast Asia "subversive" poor voters remain a major elite concern.<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

*This professorial address is a reconstruction and reworking of a keynote speech of the same title delivered at the 2014 Philippine Political Science Association (PPSA) International Conference, "Gazing Out: Locating Asia in the Philippine Political Worldview," 10–11 April 2014 (rescheduled to 2–3 May 2014), Graduate and Continuing Education Building, University of the Philippines Visayas, Iloilo Campus, Iloilo City, Philippines. I would like to thank the PPSA board and its then president Herman Joseph S. Kraft for this kind invitation and for those (still) attending the conference (despite its rescheduling due to inclement weather) for their feedback. I also wish to thank two anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments that I believe have strengthened the paper, the editorial team of Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints for their constructive editing suggestions, and the journal's editor, Filomeno V. Aguilar Jr., for his encouragement.*

- 1 Of course, it could be objected that in electoral authoritarian regimes, where voting may be free but not fair, regular balloting is not enough for the system to be considered democratic. But it is clearly a necessary, if not sufficient, condition.
- 2 It might be objected that, as a Nazi, Schmitt had no interest in "democracy" whatsoever. In fact, he never subscribed, at least in terms of his own political theory, to the Nazi racist ideology, attempting instead to justify authoritarian rule through decisive leadership legitimated through plebiscitary, Rousseauian-style popular acclamation. In fact, Schmitt was forced to resign from a high-ranking Nazi position when he was attacked in an SS publication for not being a "true" anti-Semite, citing his earlier writings that had criticized Nazi racial theories.

- 3 This use of the term "moral economy" is indebted to James C. Scott (1976), who, in turn, was influenced by E. P. Thompson (1971). The main thesis of the moral economy school is that the poor insist that social relations be structured to insure communal subsistence, not individual advantage. Given the precariousness of their circumstances, risk reduction is more important than interest maximization. While Thompson applied the concept of moral economy to bread riots in eighteenth-century England, Scott studied peasant rebellions in twentieth-century Southeast Asia. In this essay, rather than protests, the focus is on the poor's attitude toward elections.
- 4 It might be objected at this point that even if the votes of the poor are informed by communalist preferences after a campaign is over an unjust political system has been preserved, if not reinforced, through the electoral system. It is true that the poor do "return to the same old system" after an election where they remain relatively weak. But it is more than this. They are *constitutive* of an electoral system that gives them, as has been shown above, some real power (surprising considering that they are poor and presumed powerless), including a veto over leaders they see as not adequately serving their communities. The general point is that given the context of the (inevitable) weakness and vulnerability of the poor it is surprising that the "same old system" gives the poor any power at all via their votes.
- 5 In the 2016 Philippine presidential campaign (ongoing as of this writing) one of the presidential candidates has been a cause for elite worry. Using pro-poor populist appeals, Vice President Jejomar "Jojo" Binay did well in early opinion polls, despite corruption allegations concerning his time as Makati mayor. Elite fears of Binay paralleled earlier worries about Estrada, whom the rich saw as corrupt but remained popular among poor voters (ANC 2015). The rise of Rodrigo "Digong" Duterte in the polls, who has run with a call for restoring "peace and order" even if it proves to be at the expense of human rights, is a more complicated case because his strongest base is not the poorest voters ("E" in Philippine election polling lingo) but with elites and lower middle-class voters (Flores 2016). Duterte's neoauthoritarian appeals to elites and the lower middle class make his election strategy similar to Prabowo Subianto's bid for the Indonesian presidency in 2014, as he also called for strong-armed tactics to "restore discipline," which resonated particularly strongly with the better off in society (Aspinall 2015b; Mietzner 2014).

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