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**FOREWORD****2023 SOUTHEAST ASIA UPDATE*****Elections in Southeast Asia: Prospects for Freedom, Civil Society and Protection of Human Rights***

Recent elections in Malaysia, Thailand, Timor Leste, and the Philippines as well as several other countries that held elections in 2023 and 2024 such as Myanmar and Indonesia, exhibit some new dynamics in the political landscape in Southeast Asia. While the political dynamics vary across countries in the region, they pointed to two diverging patterns. On the one hand, there is the apparent political fatigue on the part of voters toward the dominant ruling party and the concomitant rise of the alternative. On the other hand, these elections bolstered the tendency towards democratic regression by facilitating the rise of populist leaders connected to the authoritarian past. The Philippines, for example, is often seen as an indication of the so-called authoritarian nostalgia.

Regardless of the dynamics, the political outcomes in these countries will impact upon their democratic journey especially regarding freedom, human rights, and the future of civil society. Many observers have expressed concerns about the vibrant life of civil society after the results of elections in many of these countries. This is because in some cases restrictions on freedom have been imposed not so much by the state but by the members of civil society itself.

This is quite different from the past when all members of civil society were united to counterbalance the power of the state. Currently we see the phenomenon that elements of civil society counterbalance each other, thus weakening their power vis-à-vis the state. States can, and have, co-opted some of them to counter those on the opposite side.

In general terms, many of the states in Southeast Asia have been able to silence critical voices against the ruling power through various means, including cooptation, using the grey area of the discriminative

interpretation and implementation of otherwise lawful regulations, legal harassment by elements of the states including in the social media space, or outright threats to those who stand on the other side of power. In short, freedom and democracy are in a defensive position on many fronts.

The different patterns of political dynamics in the region are worth exploring. There are important questions that need to be addressed: What will be the future of freedom, democracy, and civil society in Southeast Asia considering the current state of political dynamics in the region? As far as elections are concerned, why and under what conditions do voters want to either maintain the existing governing power or replace them with an alternative? If we assume that voters are tired of politics, why do some of them want the alternative while others want to simply restore the authoritarian past? How do the results of their choices impact on their political life in the future, especially regarding their freedom, human rights, and the vibrant life of civil society?

On the other hand, what is the nature of the relationship between civil society and the state in the context of procedural democracy in Southeast Asia, where in some countries elections have been conducted without interruption for almost three decades? What are the causes of the relative weakness of civil society that leads to the fragile state of democracy in the countries in Southeast Asia? Regarding the trend of democratic regression, are there institutional, cultural, structural, or even international factors that need to be considered?

These are the questions that led to paper presentations from leading scholars of Southeast Asia in the first Southeast Asia Update Conference hosted by Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia (UIII) on October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2023. This book brings together a number of papers presented at the conference and the introduction by Prof. Farish A. Noor ties these papers into a coherent whole.

We would like to thank our donors, Luminate and the Asia Foundation, for making the conference possible with their generous financial support. The administrative team at the Faculty of Social

Science (FOSS) as well as at the media team of UIII level helped with logistical preparation. Dr. Farish Noor has done marvellous work as the editor of the book. Not to forget also our student volunteers who helped during the conference as well as Dr. Gde Metera from Institute for Advanced Research (IFAR) at UIII for serving as co-convenor of the 1<sup>st</sup> Southeast Asia Update.

We hope that this book will help to keep alive and sustain the conversation regarding democracy and democratization in the region today.

**Philips J. Vermonte**

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& Convenor, 1<sup>st</sup> Southeast Asia Update 2023