

Introduction: Changing Asia

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Over the last few years, there have been events that brought about dramatic changes to Asia. These events included the 1997 financial crisis, the economically crippling Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic, the accelerated formation and near collapse of Southeast Asia as an economic regional bloc, terrorist attacks and Islamic extremism, among others. In this special issue of *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies*, five scholars examine many of these events that have shaped, and are still shaping, contemporary Asia.

The first article by *John Clammer* offers a fresh sociological look at the Asian financial crisis. He challenges the conventional economic understanding of why Asian economies collapsed after the value of the Thai Baht and Indonesian Rupiah fell in 1997. The crisis was not just a financial distortion of a functioning capitalist system but a crisis of globalization and modernization, he argues. The model of rational development, as advocated by economists and world bodies such as the IMF, has largely ignored the social and cultural consequences in the region. The subsequent re-alignment of class formation and social differences provided the social contexts for the eruption of the crisis. Asian economies have embraced globalization and modernization without understanding, and managing, the changes they face in their own societies, and if this continues, this article concludes, the next crisis will be worse.

Globalization and modernization are often associated with Americanization and American domination. In Asia as in elsewhere, the dependence on US investments and the spread of US cultural forms have started the parallel processes of resistance against US hegemony. However, on 11 September 2001 the world was shocked by the violent attacks in the USA. That fateful day focused minds. Regardless of race, nationality or class, millions around the world cried and threw support behind the Americans. And consequently Islamic extremism is framed as the enemy of the world. Predominantly Muslim countries in Asia were put on the defensive, while the large majority of Muslims condemned the terrorist attacks. Regardless, Islamic resurgences are now being blamed for subverting economic and political recovery in

Asia. In the second article, *Luthfi Assyaukanie* argues that Islam and liberal democracy are compatible. He uses the case of Indonesia and shows that there is a growing class of Muslim intellectuals that wants to decouple the state from dated religious views. These intellectuals will play an important role in introducing democratic values, which are also in the spirit of Islam, in Indonesia. While this is a positive sign of a democratizing Asia, the Indonesian case shows that the social and cultural impediments are difficult to negotiate away.

While Islamic militarism is often framed as an attack against the West, Southeast Asia has not been spared from terrorist attacks. On 12 October 2002, a nightclub in Bali, Indonesia, was attacked, killing more than 180 people. This attack shocked the world. Predominantly Islamic countries like Indonesia and Malaysia faced the challenge of reporting such a barbaric act committed by their fellow believers in their own region. *Sonia Ambrosio de Nelson* looks at how the print media in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore reported this event. She highlights the challenges faced by the state-controlled media, and how Islamic extremism was being classified in the Malay World. Her article alludes to the difficulties the Indonesian, Malaysian and Singaporean governments face in their effort in nation building and social engineering along ethnic and religious lines.

The globalization, modernization and Americanization debates in Asia are complex. Politicians in Asia talk about sovereignty, doing things the Asian way and stemming the tide of bad western influences. At the same time, Asian economies are actively cultivating an ever-deepening reliance on the global economy, dominated by the Americans.

Emulating the European Union and the North American Free Trade Area, Asian economies want to come together to become a formidable economic force in the world economy. States in Southeast Asia came together to form the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the 1960s for security and political reasons. This regional grouping has extended its ambition not only to bringing about political stability but also economic prosperity to member states. However, the strength of their brotherhood is stronger in words than in practice. *Benny Teh Cheng Guan* investigates why that is the case. He argues that there are structural and organizational flaws that prevent a more successful and closer integration of ASEAN. His dire warnings can be seen as a road map to better integration, but only if politicians will listen and the countries are willing to cooperate.

Reflecting what Teh has written, and accentuating the fact that different ASEAN member countries are at different levels of social and economic development, the establishment of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) has been a slow and tedious process. Some member countries are not ready for regional economic integration, and member countries that are ready are impatient with their neighbours' slow progress. As a result, a number of ASEAN members, including Singapore and Thailand, started establishing free trade agreements (FTAs) with other economies outside the region. Will this threaten AFTA? *Jose L. Tongzon* looks at how FTAs affect agreements in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and other regional trading arrangements. For the general economic good of the world, he argues that the WTO process should still be given priority despite its limitations. Regional trade agreements are second best policy options. He argues that FTAs cannot promote trade liberalization fully world-wide.

Teh and Tongzon's articles show clearly that Islamic insurgency is not the only force that causes economic problems in Asia. Asian countries, while aiming to be more competitive in the global economy, are not cooperating amongst themselves against western economic powers. Anti-globalization and anti-Americanization debates have largely ignored the region's destructive internal squabbings, stemming from individual countries' own political and economic interests.

These different articles show the diverse approaches to reading a changing Asia. We, as the guest editors of this special issue, frame these issues as part of the global-influence, local-responses debate. Globalization and modernization are spoken of fondly when seen to bring about prosperity and development, but these processes are also spoken of as domination and evil when desired identities and cultural forms are being displaced. The economy and society are closely intertwined. The ways in which globalization and anti-globalization discourses are mobilized depend eventually on the contexts, circumstances and the pursuit of specific individual interests. We can also say the same of the mobilization of Islamic and anti-Islamic extremist discourses.

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