

# Southeast Asia

*Past & Present* (Seventh Edition)

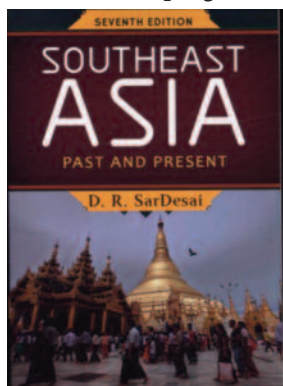
By D.R. SARDESAI

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Reviewed by Jon G. Malek

The seventh edition of D.R. SarDesai's *Southeast Asia: Past and Present* is an ambitious and updated study that gives the reader a sweeping and informative view of the history of the region.



In about 370 pages, SarDesai seeks to introduce readers to the major themes and problems in Southeast Asian history from the prehistoric period to the present. For students of Southeast Asian history, this text offers a solid introduction to the region while providing an ample base from which to leap into more specific issues using the book's considerable

bibliography.

The book is organized much like a textbook, despite the near absence of images and figures (while there are ample maps in the first three parts, the fourth part has no maps and only one table) offers readers little respite from voluminous amounts of information. While newer sources may be found in the bibliography, there are many sources going back to the 1950s and before. Introducing readers to the broader historiography is beneficial, but more updated sources could help guide students to current debates and problems in the field. More footnotes could offer support to some of SarDesai's claims, but also offer readers a springboard with which to investigate an issue further or to trace arguments within the sources. Nevertheless, SarDesai includes content on the most current issues to his readers through this updated edition, including recent terrorism in the Philippines, the fallout of the 2004 tsunami, and Cyclone Nargis that hit the Irrawaddy River Delta in 2008. The book has four parts: the precolonial period, the period of European colonialism, the nationalist movements following World War II, and Southeast Asia in an era of "freedom."

Throughout his account, SarDesai presents Southeast Asia as invariably caught in the power traps of other cultural or political powers. The pre-European period, covered in part one, discusses the influences of Southeast Asia's two powerhouse neighbors: the Indian subcontinent and China. Wedged be-

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tween these two powers, SarDesai emphasizes the role that China and India have played on Southeast Asia's development. He maintains that each region had different spheres of impact: India never had political machinations in Southeast Asia, and so its influence was largely cultural, albeit very important. In contrast, China was often concerned with the political makeup in the region and had a policy of maintaining a system of tribute states and politically fragmented neighbors (14–17). A strong point in SarDesai's survey is his demonstration and emphasis of a preexisting indigenous culture, with which outside influences came into contact (14). SarDesai reflects the argument that Sino-Indian influences were selectively chosen and adopted by indigenous cultures, with a major conduit of cultural influence deriving from Indian or Chinese scholars who were invited by indigenous kingdoms.

Following the brief section "Colonial Interlude" (77–126) are two final sections on nationalist movements and the "Fruits of Freedom." The section on Southeast Asian freedom (183–379) accounts for nearly half of the book. This in itself emphasizes what I believe to be SarDesai's real concern—the post-World War II period and the movements for freedom that followed it. At times, the view that this period was one of "independence" and "freedom" seems oversimplified. In this context, freedom can be conceived in two ways: as the freedom of a state and its leaders to act without external influence or control within its borders and as the ability of a people to exercise a fair amount of autonomy within their sovereign nation. In both conceptions, freedom is problematic in Southeast Asia, as cases in SarDesai's analysis demonstrate. Even Thailand, which is championed as the only nation to resist colonial control in Southeast Asia, was forced to maintain its independence by surrendering territorial claims along its borders to aggressive neighbors. Many of the internal political problems that have stymied independence in Southeast Asia are in part the result of the former colonial power structures. This is not to suggest, of course, that all current Southeast Asian issues are a direct result of Western colonialism, but, for instance, the political elites who have dominated Philippine politics following the 1898 "independence" from Spain came to prominence because of the colonial machine. When the US government took over from the Spanish, these political elites and their

descendants were enlisted by the new colonial government and continue to dominate national politics today.<sup>1</sup> This information is present in SarDesai's analysis, but a more explicit linkage of these continuations to the problems associated with the demise of colonial regimes could be useful, especially for an audience new to this area.

Within this discussion on Southeast Asian independence, though, is a focus on people power movements and the growing political awareness of the region, which is extremely important. Aside from the 1986 EDSA Revolution in the Philippines, SarDesai credits people power movements with the fall of numerous corrupt governments. In Myanmar, the military state might still be in power, but popular protests, bolstered by international pressure, have resulted in the release of Aung San Su Kyi. In Indonesia, while the fall of Sukarno was brought about by a military coup, it was bolstered by growing frustration with the government; it was popular displeasure with the corruption of Suharto's regime that also brought it down.

A final theme to be discussed is SarDesai's contrasting approach to Western-style capitalism and communism in Southeast Asia. The chapters in part four all include a discussion on economic development, some more in-depth than others. The success of these economies seem to be the adoption of capitalist developmental models and the presence of foreign investments, although the text does not explicitly discuss which capitalist models each nation adopts, such as state-assisted capitalism, large corporate structures, or investor-funded entrepreneurial ventures. Present alongside these discussions is a lingering suspicion of communism, placed almost invariably within the realm of a new "Cold War" developing between the United States and China. SarDesai touches upon these tensions between the two nations regarding the issue of the ongoing territorial dispute in the South China Sea. This edition references China's increasing power and the anxieties that its territorial claims in the South China Sea are presenting to members of ASEAN, such as the Philippines and Việt Nam. The updated text discusses relatively up-to-date events, although it does not go in-depth into the current issues. US claims of national interest in the South China Sea (351) are referenced, while more detailed attention is given to the diplomatic tensions between China and Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines over the Spratly Islands (212–213). SarDesai gives his most overt stance against communism when he argues that if other Southeast Asian countries adopted such policies that have "taken the wind out of Communist sails" (307), communism would have little relevance.

It therefore appears that SarDesai's emphasis on the importance of Western-style capitalism, along with the importance of Western investment in places like Việt Nam and the

Philippines, is couched within a larger competition between the West (especially the US) and Communist China's current influence in the region. What might be suggested to mitigate this presentation of Southeast Asia as a power play between the US and China would be to emphasize the preexisting indigenous cultures that still operate. As in times past, these indigenous political cultures are still operating from an internal logic that transforms Western and Indo-Chinese influences into something of its own, which is, in important ways, independent of either Chinese or American influences.

In spite of these concerns, however, SarDesai's *Southeast Asia: Past & Present* remains an invaluable text, especially for those interested in or teaching the modern period. In comparison to other texts, this book offers a more cohesive account of the region's development, referring to similar topics in each chapter. For new students, it serves as a valuable introduction that highlights many themes and problems current in the region. One aspect that I appreciate is that SarDesai does not only give far-reaching and generalized accounts of Southeast Asia, but uses case studies for each region and period to help demonstrate the changes he is discussing. For those more adept with the region, it can also serve as a useful reference. The text is easy to navigate, and a chronological chart appended to the text allows one to overview important events in conjunction with each other at a glance. As such, critiques made against this text must be hedged with an appreciation of the great task represented in this text. Indeed, from a pedagogical standpoint, the source of these critiques can be very useful discussion points of the book in a classroom or seminar setting, and can be useful when considering what other texts to use in addition to this. ■

#### NOTE

1. Nicholas Tarling, *Imperialism in Southeast Asia: A Fleeting, Passing Phase* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 191.

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