

ASEAN, Social Conflict, and Intervention in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

This thesis challenges the prevailing academic and journalistic consensus that ASEAN states, bound by a cast-iron norm of non-interference, do not intervene in other states' internal affairs. It argues that ASEAN states have frequently engaged in acts of intervention, often with very serious, negative consequences. Using methods of critical historical sociology, the thesis reconstructs the history of ASEAN's non-interference principle and interventions from ASEAN's inception onwards, drawing on sources including ASEAN and UN documents, US and UK archives, and policymaker interviews. It focuses especially on three case studies: East Timor, Cambodia, and Myanmar.

The thesis argues that both the emergence of ideologies of non-intervention and their violation can be explained by the social conflicts animating state policies. Non-interference was developed by embattled, authoritarian, capitalist elites in an attempt to bolster their defence of capitalist social order from radical challenges. Where adherence to non-intervention failed to serve this purpose, it was discarded or manipulated to permit cross-border 'containment' operations. After communism was defeated in the ASEAN states, foreign policy continued to promote the interests of dominant, state-linked business groups and oligarchic factions. Non-interference shifted to defend domestic power structures from the West's liberalising agenda. However, ASEAN elites continued meddling in neighbouring states even as containment operations were discarded. This contributed to the collapse of Cambodia's ruling coalition in 1997, and ASEAN subsequently intervened to restore it. The 1997 Asian financial crisis dealt a crippling blow to ASEAN. To contain domestic unrest in Indonesia, core ASEAN states joined a humanitarian intervention in East Timor in 1999. In the decade since, non-interference has been progressively weakened as the core members struggle to regain domestic legitimacy and lost international political and economic space. This is expressed most clearly in ASEAN's attempts to insert itself into Myanmar's democratisation process after decades of failed 'constructive engagement'.

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