

## Book Review

### *Territorial Governance in Southeast Asia*

Andrew Harding  
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Over the past three decades, a significant politico-administrative transformation observed across various global regions has been the rise of territorial and subnational governance, primarily driven by area-based decentralization reforms. Specifically, within the context of Southeast Asia, this transformation constitutes a fundamental element of the wave of democratization that emerged following the end of the Cold War. This phenomenon can be viewed as a reaction against the centralization of politics and governance—a process originally undertaken to establish stability for the necessities of state and nation-building. This centralization was further reinforced in the name of expedited economic development during the post-World War II period. Consequently, the political authority and rights of diverse local communities were continually suppressed for a prolonged period.

Overall, research works and publications on decentralization and subnational governance in developing countries—and specifically in Southeast Asia—began to emerge in the late 1990s, often supported by International Development Agencies (IDAs).<sup>1</sup> However, the resulting studies typically focus on contemporary decentralization and local government, viewing decentralization primarily as a strategic instrument for creating change in the name of reform, both administratively and politically. They aim to analyze the problems and obstacles to driving decentralization activities, while concurrently seeking ways to enhance the administrative capacity of

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<sup>1</sup> Among the early works that cover this region is the report produced by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), “Government Decentralization Reforms in Developing Countries” (March 2001).

local governments. Crucially, these works tend to neglect or fail to adequately emphasize the historical developments and institutional frameworks that influence the transformation of structures and forms of territorial governance linking to the current situation. Furthermore, they often overlook the dimensions of diversity, including ethnicity, religion, linguistics, ways of life, and other factors existing within the local contexts of these countries in the region.

Based on the foregoing discussion, Andrew Harding's *Territorial Governance in Southeast Asia* is a highly significant work for at least three reasons. Firstly, the book specifically focuses on explaining the phenomena of decentralization and territorial governance in the Southeast Asian region. It achieves this through case studies of five countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, The Philippines, and Thailand. While existing studies on this subject are present, they remain limited in number and often concentrate on comparative analysis of specific, narrow issues. Therefore, this book stands out as one of the few works that can serve as a crucial starting point for establishing a comprehensive understanding and illuminating the overall development of territorial governance across all five nations from the past to the present.

Secondly, the book is a comparative study of five countries within the region, which reflects the author's substantial diligence and effort. The presentation structure is systematically organized, allowing readers to clearly discern the similarities and differences among these countries. Furthermore, it includes case studies on special regional autonomy in three instances across three different nations. This provides a view of decentralization and territorial governance that extends beyond general local devolution, linking it instead to the phenomenon of asymmetric decentralization.

Finally, although the author is a professor of law and frames the book's core study through a comparative lens of public law and relevant institutional dimensions, he successfully integrates a historical approach along with an explanatory style akin to area studies tradition. This fusion renders the analysis and explanations of the various case studies vibrant and less rigid than traditional Legal-Institutional approaches. These reflect through an attempt by the author to answer one of the book's key questions: "does territorial governance in Southeast Asia reflect in any way traditional, pre-modern forms of local governance, or does it simply take the form of modern standardized agencies imposed territorially?"<sup>2</sup>

The content of this volume is organized into four sections. *Part I: General Issues* is dedicated to foundational concepts and critical debates concerning the study of territorial governance, considering both global perspectives and the specific context of Southeast Asia. This section is further subdivided. The first sub-section focuses on analyzing the relationship between territorial governance and decentralization in light of crucial issues, including, but not limited to, the notions of localism and subsidiarity, the wave of decentralization and institutional design, the impact of history and culture, and centralization and the developmental state. The second sub-section presents key

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Harding, *Territorial Governance in Southeast Asia* (Hart Publishing 2025) 27.

principles, concepts, and frameworks originating from constitutional law that influence decentralization and territorial governance. Examples include the concepts of entrenchment and the basic structure doctrine, as well as other legal models for defining the status of local entities that significantly impact the devolution of power and local autonomy.

*Part II: Case Studies* presents the historical development of territorial governance and the resulting tensions that emerge between the central state's necessity for centralization and the inherent spatial heterogeneity (diversity) of specific areas. These dynamics are reflected in various models used to manage central-local relations and the ongoing search for appropriate forms of territorial governance observed in five distinct countries. While *Part III: Special Regional Autonomy* features three case studies of territorial governance models (Aceh and Papua in Indonesia; Bangsamoro and Muslim Mindanao in the Philippines; and Sabah and Sarawak in Malaysia) derived from the concept of Asymmetric Decentralization. This concept serves as an institutional innovation for spatial governance designed to address "deep differences"—whether in terms of ethnicity, culture, language, or religion—existing between national minority and majority communities, which subsequently lead to various political and administrative tensions.

And the last part, *Part IV: Conclusion*, represents the author's attempt to synthesize and summarize the lessons learned from the preceding case studies. Furthermore, this section seeks to further discuss various compelling and distinctive issues related to territorial governance in the Southeast Asian region by comparative analysis with experiences drawn from other regions. The key substantive focus of this section is the theme of "Southeast Asian Innovations in Territorial Governance," which encapsulates several noteworthy innovations derived from the case studies, including: Regional Autonomy (Special/Asymmetric) as a crucial mechanism for managing conflicts rooted in ethno-religious identity and history; the design of legal instruments and intergovernmental relations to accommodate the principles of localism and subsidiarity; the emergence of new democratic innovations that extend beyond local elections; and territorial governance mechanisms at the village level that generate innovation by integrating indigenous customs and local identity with modern legal frameworks.

This book is highly valuable for those interested in decentralization and subnational governance, as it offers readers a fascinating insight into the richness and diversity of various sub-national territorial management mechanisms within the region. Significantly, the analysis is not limited to explaining only the formal structure of local authorities established under the model of an elected executive and local council. Instead, it allows us to discern the informal or semi-formal mechanisms that exist, often overlapping with the primary structure of area-based governance. Furthermore, the volume highlights new innovations in territorial governance through the design of novel legal instruments that are specifically tailored to align with the unique identity and characteristics of local communities in this region.

Nevertheless, there are some critical observations regarding the content of this volume. Firstly, although the book attempts to explain decentralization and territorial governance in the region by linking it to the dimension of historical development, the explanation does not systematically present the narrative through rigorous periodization into distinct eras—for instance, the pre-modern period, the colonial era, the period of modernization or state and nation-building, and the era of rapid economic development. Consequently, the discussion of various issues may appear to jump back and forth between the present and past periods in several sections, which could potentially confuse readers lacking prior foundational knowledge of the region. Secondly, although this book constitutes a comparative study of countries within the region, it must be acknowledged that the research design was not intended to analyze variables within the relational framework of system (territorial governance) versus context. Instead, the volume appears primarily focused on synthesizing and conceptualizing the key characteristics that are common to the subnational governance experiences of this group of regional countries.

Finally, the book does not include the provision of tables or diagrams to summarize the essential elements of the various models, mechanisms, and legal instruments related to territorial governance of each case countries. Consequently, this omission may present difficulties in comprehension for readers who are newly initiated into the study of decentralization and territorial governance. Therefore, the inclusion of summary conceptual maps or the preparation of an appendix featuring overall country profiles would likely facilitate a much better understanding of the core substance for interested scholars.

In conclusion, this volume is not intended as an introductory text providing fundamental knowledge on territorial governance in the region. Rather, its core substance serves to stimulate reflection and provoke new questions concerning the diverse models and key characteristics observed within territorial governance mechanisms. Furthermore, it emphatically reinforces the realization that the global wave of decentralization is not merely a strategic instrument for enhancing administrative capacity and the delivery of public services in a subnational context, but fundamentally functions as an institutional tool for accommodating pluralism and managing conflicts arising from deep-seated diversity.

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<sup>\*</sup> **Indexing Thai names.** “Although family names are used in Thailand, Thai people are normally known by their given names, which come first, as in English names. The name is often alphabetized under the first name, but practice varies.” The Chicago Manual of Style (18th edn, University of Chicago Press 2024) §15.93.