

Protest Waves and Mass Violence in Southeast Asia in Long Durée

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Abstract

This study explores the trajectory of protest waves and mass violence in Southeast Asia in the long twentieth century. Political and social mobilization for democracy has swept the region of Southeast Asia since 2019. Myanmar and Thailand have particularly experienced one of the most revolutionary moments in their history of democracy. As of now, we have almost enough hindsight to compare this regional protest wave to revolutionary moments from the 1980s, the 1960s, and even earlier decades.

By considering one of the most fundamental characteristics of social movements is *connectedness* both temporally and spatially with another one, we need to draw on the empirical investigation that examines every single protest located in different countries of this region is linked to each other by the world-historical layers of dominant power structure and dynamics and regional political process. To this end, this study uses the dataset of protest events spanning five countries (Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam) in Southeast Asia from *The New York Times* between 1870 and 2016. By mapping out about 1,800 popular protests across the countries in Southeast Asia, this study develops the following research questions: 1) Do popular protests appear in clusters across times and locations in the region? 2) What is the most shared theme of popular protests in the region? 3) What are the main issues of the major protest episodes in each country? 4) What are the immediate regional and global dynamics to make the short-term cycles and long-term waves of mobilization in the region? 5) How do we interpret the relations between the regional protest waves and the larger protest waves in the global south?

The most striking feature of the protest waves in Southeast Asia for the long twentieth century is the revealing of four greater temporal clusters of popular protests: the 1930s, the long 1950/60s, the 1980s, and the late 1990s. The empirical finding shows the profound impact of world-historical decolonization, national liberation movements, and democratization has led to *temporal* and *spatial* diffusion of struggles against exclusion across a large set of countries in Southeast Asia. In sum, examining the protest events, protest cycles, and protest waves in Southeast Asia over the long twentieth century from a world-historical perspective offers a path to understanding the continuation of current political and social mobilization in the region and how periods of struggles may be just the one wave in a larger sea of long-term resistance.

Table 1. Countries in Southeast Asia in Protest Events, 1870-2016

Country/Region	Total	Peak Year Protest	Peak Year
Indonesia	352	68	1958
Myanmar	261	26	1988
the Philippines	531	57	1899
Thailand	140	14	1933
Vietnam	475	60	1960
Southeast Asia (5)	1,759	83	1966

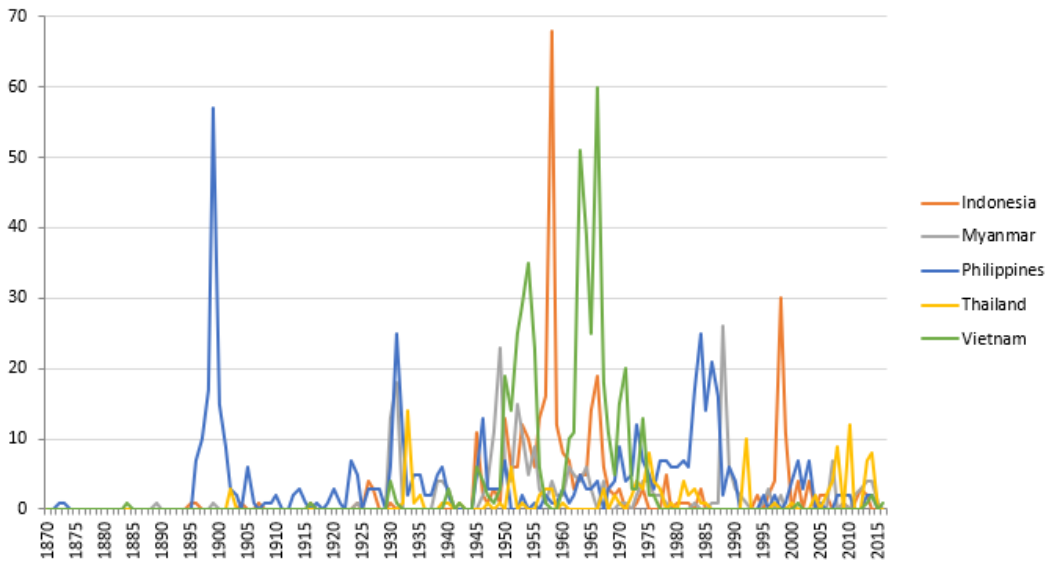


Figure 1. Protest Events in Southeast Asia, 1870-2016

Table 2. Four Protest Waves in Southeast Asia, 1870-2016

Protest Waves	the 1930s	the Long 1960s	the 1980s	the Early 2000s
Year	1930-1933	1945-1975	1983-1989	1998-2001
Duration	4	31	7	4
Frequency of Protest Events	95	1,010	144	61
Annual Average of Protest Event	24	33	21	15
Peak Years (Protest Event)	1931	1966	1984	1998

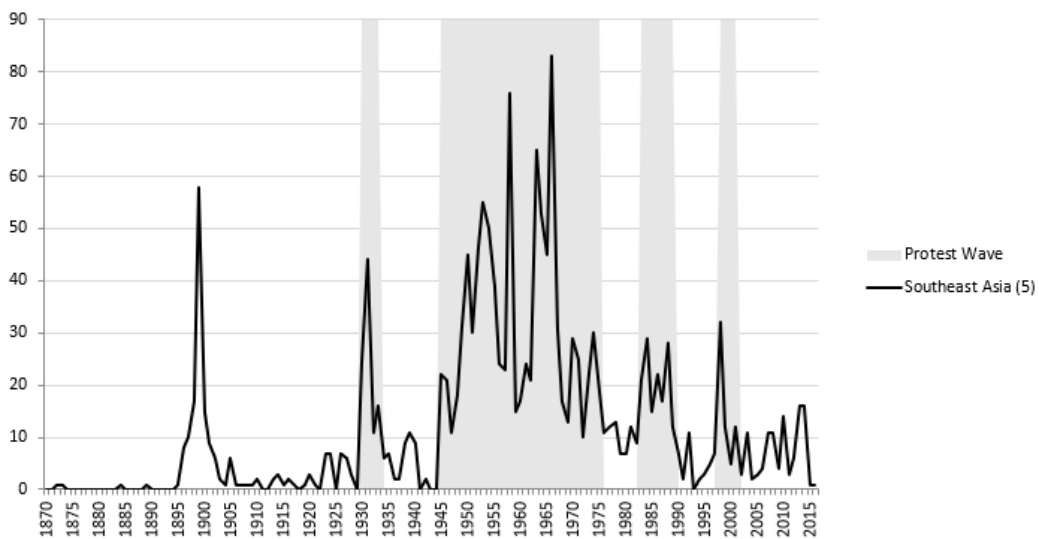


Figure 2. Protest Events in Southeast Asia, 1870-2016

Table 3. Protest Events by Theme in Southeast Asia, 1870-2016

Theme	Total	Rate (%)	Frequency of Protest Events in the Peak Year	Peak Year
Struggles against Exclusion	1,613	91.5	76	1958
Struggles against Exploitation	150	8.5	10	1931, 1966

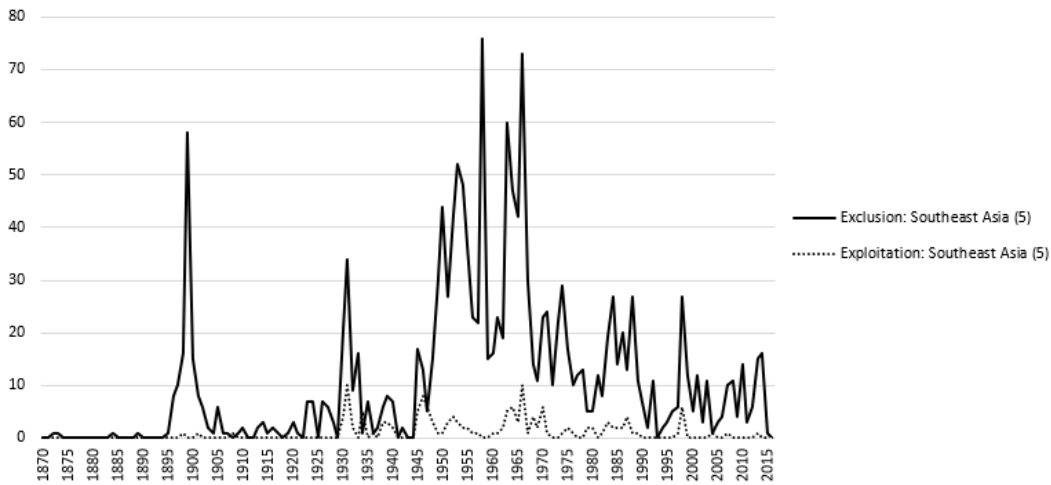


Figure 3. Protest Events by Theme in Southeast Asia, 1870-2016

Table 4. Struggles against Exclusion and Struggles against Exploitation by Country, 1870-2016

Country	Exploitation	Exclusion	Total	Exploitation (%)	Exclusion (%)
Indonesia	328	26	354	92.7	7.3
Myanmar	244	17	261	93.5	6.5
the Philippines	457	76	533	85.7	14.3
Thailand	131	9	140	93.6	6.4
Vietnam	453	22	475	95.4	4.6

Table 5. 22 Protest Episodes/Cycles and the Four Global Protest Waves

Protest Waves	1930s	1950s	1980s	2010s	Not in Wave	Total
Number of Protest Episodes/Cycles	3	6	4	1	8	22
Rate (%)	13.6	27.3	18.2	4.6	36.4	100.0