

Non-Fiction

Southeast Asia enters the danger zone

Inequality and toxic identity politics haunt Michael Vatikiotis's portrait of a region often celebrated for its dynamism



A sewing class at a camp for internally displaced people in Myanmar, 2014 © Magnum Photos

3 HOURS AGO by: Victor Mallet

Alluring and fraught with danger: Southeast Asia is both of these, as the title of Michael Vatikiotis's *Blood and Silk* suggests. This region of 600m people, contested by a rising China and a declining US, also remains hugely important to the rest of the world. It was in Thailand that the Asian financial crisis erupted 20 years ago this July with the crash devaluation of the baht, and it is through the Strait of Malacca that the world sends about \$6,000bn of its trade and a quarter of its seaborne oil each year.

I half-expected Vatikiotis to be optimistic. Southeast Asia, after all, embraces 10 increasingly prosperous economies that have for the most part comprehensively outpaced their postcolonial equivalents in Africa since the 1960s; even the laggards such as Myanmar and Laos have recently started to catch up. And, unlike their counterparts in the Middle East, the predominantly Muslim nations of Indonesia and Malaysia are known for religious tolerance and a syncretic culture that has absorbed influences from Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Confucianism as well as the Islam of the Arabian peninsula.

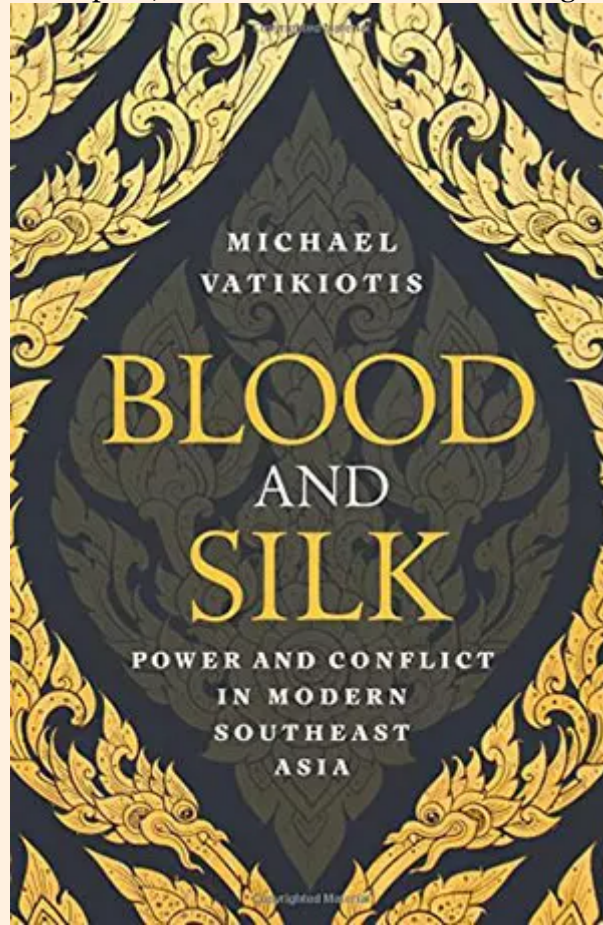
Yet Vatikiotis makes a bleak assessment of Southeast Asia's prospects. He speaks several of the region's languages, and after studying, working and travelling in the region as a journalist and peace mediator (between insurgents and governments) for more than three decades, he builds a strong case for his grim conclusions.

The problem is not that the author is unaware of what is good about Southeast Asia — including kindness to strangers, humour, inclusiveness and flexibility — but rather that he sees these very qualities being eclipsed by a mixture of old-fashioned tyranny and baneful new influences from abroad.

Where democracy has arrived — as it did in Cambodia under the auspices of the UN in 1993 — it has in several cases quickly been subverted or demolished. Hun Sen, a former Khmer Rouge commander now supported by China, has ruled Cambodia with only a brief interruption for nearly four decades and, like an ancient Khmer king, has a

retinue of hundreds of ministers and secretaries of state and a 5,000-strong bodyguard. Last year, he ordered his citizens to refer to him as “Glorious Supreme Prime Minister and Powerful Commander”.

Vatikiotis writes that many of his Southeast Asian friends regard the future with apprehension. “I notice a distinct contrast between Pollyanna-ish Westerners all agog over the glitz and growth in the region, predicting its glorious future, and anxious Southeast Asians, rich and poor, who harbour worries of lurking catastrophe.”



Those are strong words. But the periodic waves of democratic optimism that followed first decolonisation and then the overthrow of dictators in countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia have undoubtedly given way to ripples of concern about the future.

Vatikiotis identifies three main reasons for his forebodings and those of his interlocutors. First, inequality — and the selfishness of the business-political elites that have benefited disproportionately from economic growth both before and after Asia’s financial crisis. Just as populism has been fuelled by resentment over inequality in Trump’s America, in Brexit Britain and in oligarchical Hong Kong, so the 40 per cent of Indonesians clustered around a poverty earnings line of \$2 a day are easy prey for demagogues. It is true that prosperity has also swollen the ranks of Asia’s middle class, but this aspiring and increasingly educated bourgeoisie is governed by the same set of authoritarian leaders and their coterie of tycoons. “This is not a sustainable paradox,” the author writes. It sounds like a recipe for revolution.

The second reason is the erosion of tolerance and the rise of identity politics, whether the issue is religion or ethnicity. Vatikiotis cites figures showing that 1.6m Asians have died in “sub-national” conflicts (in other words, in wars within states and not between them) since 1947; more died in such conflicts in Asia in the decade to 2008 than in all other conflicts elsewhere in the world combined.

As for religion, the increasing influence of extremist Sunni interpretations of Islam over the past 30 years is startlingly visible in the dress codes and religiosity of the Muslims who make up 40 per cent of the region's population — and in the vilification and recent jailing for blasphemy of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, the once-popular Christian and ethnic Chinese governor of Jakarta better known as Ahok.

Buddhist extremism and intolerance is on the rise, too. Like Christians in the Middle East, religious minorities are fleeing persecution in the countries of their birth and seeking refuge with co-religionists. Myanmar's Muslim Rohingyas, for example, have been heading to Bangladesh and Malaysia.

Third and last, there are those outside forces: not only the intolerant, well-financed Islamism of the Gulf but also the rise of China as the latest imperialist superpower insensitive to the needs or wishes of its putative client states.

Blood and Silk is not a dry socio-political analysis. Vatikiotis has an eye for quirky detail, whether it be the Thai crown prince's pet poodle commissioned as an air force officer and dressed in uniform, or the self-important Muslim separatist from southern Thailand who prayed with Osama bin Laden in Khartoum but found the terrorist mastermind uninspiring and unimpressive.

In the end, though, the outlook is menacing. Indonesia risks "the kind of ethnic and religious sectarian strife we see in the Middle East today". Malaysians are dismayed by "the slow disintegration of the multiracial compact". In Thailand, there is "little prospect of the military willingly giving up power". The Philippines remains "a prisoner of oligarchy". Even Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar has disappointed her liberal supporters. We can hope that Vatikiotis is wrong, but I fear he is not.

Blood and Silk: Power and Conflict in Modern Southeast Asia, by Michael Vatikiotis, *Weidenfeld & Nicolson*, RRP£20, 352 pages

Victor Mallet is author of *The Trouble with Tigers: The Rise and Fall of South-East Asia* (HarperCollins, 1999). His book on the River Ganges will be published in October
Photograph: Magnum Photos

