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Revisiting democratization in Myanmar and Indonesia from a comparative perspective*

Thu Thi Anh Nguyen**

nguyenthianhthu270189@gmail.com

Abstract

Southeast Asia is one of the most interesting spots for democratization in the world today. The regional diversity is made up by: Indonesia, the world's third largest democratic nation, the Philippines, Asia's oldest democracy, and the consolidated democracies of Malaysia, Thailand, and other types of authoritarian rule. Besides this diversity, the transition from authoritarian rule to democracy in the region also attracts academic attention. Myanmar and Indonesia are good examples of the political transformation from the authoritarianism under the military government to democratic forms of government. However, after the resignation of Ne-Win in 1988, Burma still remained a military dictatorship, while Indonesia, after 21 years (1967-1998) under the authoritarian Suharto-led New Order government, successfully transitioned to a democratic society. The aim of this paper is to explore the different patterns of political transitions under two military dictatorships in Southeast Asia. This qualitative paper draws on documentary review, historical narratives and the critical analysis of theories in authoritarianism, democratization from different perspectives, including political culture, economic growth and crisis, political elites, class conflict, civil society and globalization. The paper found that the military junta, civilian leadership, economic development, social class, and political leaders are key factors that led to the different paths in democratic transition in the two countries. This comparative study seeks to understand the dynamics of contemporary democratization in this rapidly changing region, and contributes to improving the knowledge of authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: democratization, transition, Southeast Asia, Myanmar, Indonesia

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** Lecturer at the College of Foreign Languages, Department of International Studies, Hue University, Vietnam

Introduction

Southeast Asia is one of the most interesting regions for democratization in the world today. The regional diversity is made up by the world's third largest democratic nation - Indonesia; Asia's oldest democracy - the Philippines; the consolidated democracy of Malaysia, as well as Thailand, and many authoritarian governments. Besides this diversity, the transition from authoritarian rule to democracy in the region also attracts academic attention. Myanmar and Indonesia are good examples of the political transformation from authoritarianism under the military government to a more democratic form of government.

However, after the resignation of Ne-Win in 1988, Burma remained a military dictatorship. While Indonesia on the other hand, successfully made a transition to a democratic society after 21 years (1967-1998) under the authoritarian Suharto-led New Order Government. The aim of this paper is to explore the different patterns of political transitions under two military dictatorships in Southeast Asia. This paper draws on documentary review, historical narratives and critical analysis of theories in authoritarianism, democratization from different perspectives, including political and economic culture.

According to Samuel Huntington (1991), the world has experienced three waves of democratization. Firstly, the American Revolution in the 19th century swept across the world and ended at the conclusion of the First World War. The second wave of demo-

cratization was marked by the victory of the Allies in the Second World War in 1945. Lastly, the third wave of democratization saw the end of dictatorships in Spain, Greece, and Portugal from 1974 to 1976. Interestingly, the three waves of democratization had a complicated impact on different countries and regions (Linz and Stepan 1996, 5-14). In 1979, military regimes were present in fourteen Sub-Sahara African, nine Latin American, five Arabian, three Southeast Asian, one East Asian, and two South Asian countries. Fortunately, in the past three decades, there has been a global trend of democratic transition which is indicated by the decline of military government and military democratization (Alagappa 2001). How is the picture of democratization when it comes to Southeast Asia?

In the post-Cold War period, the political agenda in Indonesia bears striking similarities to Myanmar. The two countries in the region underwent the most extreme level of authoritarian government – military regime which has dominated in the political system after the parliament democracy collapsed in the 1950s in both countries. Practically, General Ne Win was in power in Myanmar for over two decades (1962-88) and General Suharto was the president in Indonesia for over three decades (1967-98). Following the resignation of the leaders, Indonesia transitioned to a democratic country, while Myanmar's politics are still under the domination of the military government until now (Carnegie 2010). There are several factors to explain the different pattern of political transitions and the success level of democratization efforts.

The observation democratization motivates one to investigate the following research questions:

1. Why did Burma not become a democratic country after the resignation of Ne Win in 1988, unlike Indonesia which became a democratic country after the resignation of Suharto in 1998?

2. Why similar dictatorial regimes led to contrasting patterns of political transition?

With these questions in mind, this study immediately aims to compare democratization politics in Myanmar and Indonesia by exploring the different patterns of political transitions under two military dictatorships. To answer these questions, the first part elaborates a conceptual framework of democratization. It also views democratization from major schools of thoughts. Based on theoretical backgrounds, part Two sheds light on the democratic evolution in two countries and justifies why the democratization in Myanmar following the resignation of Ne Win in 1988 did not lead to the democratic government like what happened in Indonesia after the downfall of Suharto in 1998. Part Three concludes by drawing lessons learnt on the current democratic movement in Myanmar from the experience of Indonesia.

Conceptual Framework

- These following are the conceptual definitions which being used to give better understanding on the issue:

- **Authoritarianism:** Authoritarian ideology is adopted to analyze the militarism in

Myanmar and Indonesia. Authoritarianism refers to the form of government in which the elites hold power with or without popular recognition of their legitimacy (Heywood 2002). In authoritarian government, the power is distributed among political, economic, military and clerical elites while citizen's voice is rarely heard. Among the different forms of authoritarian regime, military junta is categorized as the most extreme level. One typical characteristic of military rule is that civilian politicians are replaced by the members of the armed forces, which ultimately results in militarism. Due to monopoly of weapon usage and coercive power, military junta can directly intervene into political affairs and military force is predominantly and aggressively used to serve national policy (Heywood 2002). This coincides with Alagappa (2001)'s observation of the militarism development in Southeast Asia. Whenever conflicts come up and go beyond the control of civilian government, the armed forces will be used to keep national unity.

- **Democratization Theory:** From this perspective, the role of civil society is a prerequisite for successful democratic movements. Dahl, R. (2005) emphasizes that democracy not only requires the civilian control of the armed force but also the participation of civil society in representative government (Letki, N. 2004). In this way, successful democratization results from the activities of different groups in civil society. Among these groups, the recognition of opposition parties counts. The question is that whether that leaders and bureaucrats in civilian government should be clever at communicating with the public (Ricci and Fitch 1990).

• **Modernization Theory:** The modernization theory argues that there is a strong link between structural factor such as economic development and political change. Modernization, as Gasiorowski (1995: 882) points out, refers to “level of per capita income, the extent of literacy and education, the degree of urbanization, and the quality and extent of communications media”. Out of these factors, economic growth level is influential on the regime change. To make it clear, when an economic crisis happens, there is a likelihood that a political change will follow to eliminate the current government that was not capable of managing the country (Carnegie 2010) (Huntington 1991b). The impacts of economic crisis will be studied in later parts.

• **Strategic Choice Theory:** While the structural factors such as the strength of opposition party and civil society, economic growth can lead to democratic change as they have been discussed in the democratization theory and modernization theory, Strategy Choice Theory holds actor-oriented approaches to recognize the importance of political choices made by political leaders in democratic transitions. Democracy can evolve when political leaders are willing to make a reform.

• **Model of Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy:** In his theory, Moore (1966) insists on the relations between landowners and bourgeoisie in agriculture, among whom the middle class plays the key role in democratization process, especially the nation-building. He suggests that a society where middle class are the majority of the population is more likely to be democratic while

a regime with a domination of landlords and bourgeoisie appears to be a dictatorship. This traditional view of class relational model emphasizes the role and competence of the middle class in regime formation.

Democratization is not equivalent to democracy. Democracy should be understood as the most expected institution that is only established by the process of democratization. Generally, this process involves two stages as follows:

• **Democratic Transition:** Democratic transition starts when the authoritarian government collapses and lasts until democratic institutions are established (Linz and Stepan 1978). At this point, the dynamics of democratic transitions depend on not only structural factors but also strategic choice or negotiation made by politicians (O'Donnell et al. 1986). This justifies why democratic transitions are actor-oriented. Secondly, the outcome of process also depends on the modes of transition, ranging from the unilateral manner to violence to a multilateral compromise or negotiation (Karl and Schmitter 1991). In this process, the attitudes of authoritarian elites, the dynamics of dominant actors and the opposition party significantly affects the result (Mainwaring, O'Donnell and Valenzuela 1992).

• **Democratic Consolidation:** The fundamental idea of this stage is establishing institutional arrangements and sustaining them. According to Przeworski (1991), democratic consolidation truly occurs when all political groups recognize the legitimacy of its political institutions and totally trust their leadership

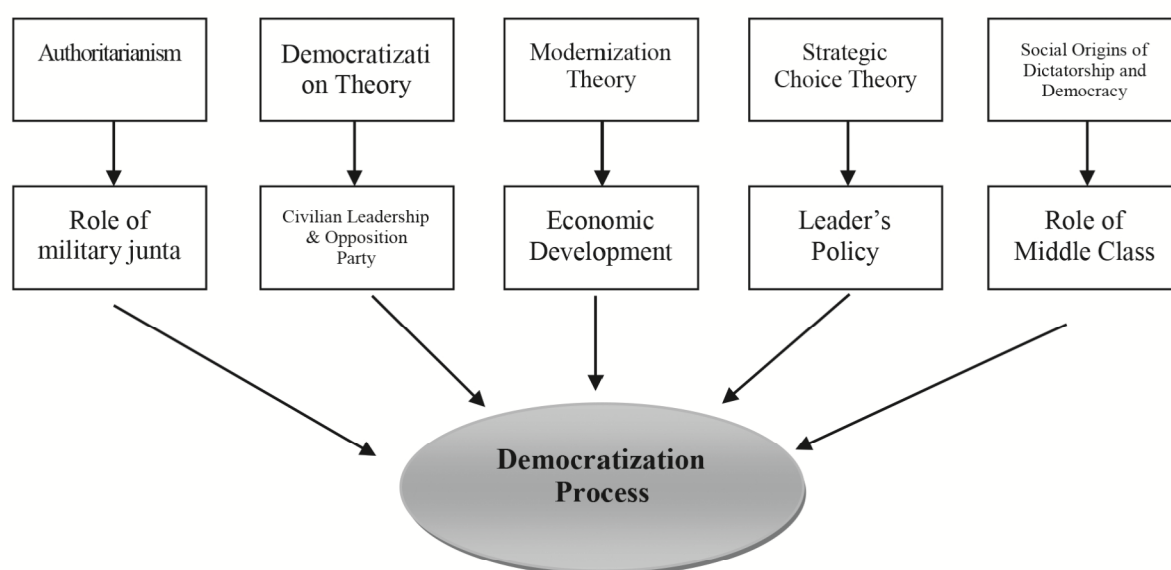
in maximizing citizen's interests. Schedler, A. (1998) notes nine remarkable characteristics of an effective democratic consolidation: widespread recognition of political institutions; fixed electoral rules; radical judicial reform; popular democratic values; marginalized anti-system actors; strong civilian rule over the military; removed authoritarian ruling; party system development, and stabilized economy.

On the other hand, Huntington points out that the dynamics of democratic consolidation is determined by the fact that whether the

newly established social and political structures are able to contribute to maintain its legitimacy. In this sense, Ethier, D. (1990)) identifies the facilitating factors in the democratic consolidation, namely transition mode, economic growth, civil society dynamics, and institutional arrangements. All these factors are reflected in the following theories to study democratization in Indonesia and Myanmar.

Based on the theoretical background, the author tends to adopt a conceptual framework to illustrate the hypothesis of the paper as follows:

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of Influential Factors in Democratization in Myanmar in 1988 and Indonesia in 1998



Findings by Comparison

Both Indonesia and Myanmar have many similarities in undergoing democratization process with a different time period in which Indonesia started the reform process towards

democratization since 1998 until this time and considered success, while Myanmar has started ten years earlier since 1988 until now but still facing a tough phases since that time due to Intervention of Military Junta in the democratization process. This part will

highlights those similarities and compare what kind of aspects that we can learn from both countries.

Role of Military Junta

It is undeniable that military junta plays a key role as national unifier from conflicts and guardian from political and economic crisis (Callahan 2001; Dittmer 2010). In 1958, the civilian government was weakened and the country underwent a parliament crisis because of the separation of the ruling Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) (Taylor 1985). At that time, Prime Minister U Nu had to resort to military. A new agenda for country reconciliation and development was issued by the military government¹. Taking advantage of the disintegration of AFPFL, in March 1962, Army Chief Gen. Ne Win led a coup in which the military claimed to play a role of unifying the country. Obviously shown, when the role of the civilian government is diminished, military tends to.

Similarly, Indonesian military is also effective in preventing ethnic conflicts and separatism movement. Its legitimacy is recognized when Indonesian military played a key role in leading coup d'état to overthrow the civilian government. Indonesian militarism is authoritarian in its centralized control and personal rule by Suharto who imposed a control over the armed force (ABRI). Executing “dual

function” or “dwifungsi” (Freedman 2006, 85), ABRI played a key role both in national defense and building civilian government. As a result, there were a large number of military members working as bureaucrats.

What is interesting is that in spite of authoritarian military rule, the level of government control differs case by case. What distinguishes Burmese and Indonesian military government is the level of government control that the military execute (Jabine 2011). On the one hand, Burmese military junta is an extremely authoritarian regime with strict control of all aspects of public life. This is shown by the fact that all governmental officers in Myanmar must have working experiences in military. On the other hand, in spite of connection with the military, Indonesia is neither a perfect democratic form of government nor a complete authoritarian military regime. This is one advantage in government apparatus to facilitate the democratization in Indonesia.

Role of Civil Society

Firstly, what distinguishes the dynamics of civilian government in Myanmar and Indonesia is that the latter played a significant role in the society. Suharto-led New Order recognized the presence of all political parties (Freedman 2006). Suharto's government also allowed three parties to participate in elections² and provided them funding for operation.

¹ This involves restoring the rule of law, consolidating democracy, and transforming Myanmar into a socialist country (Silverstein, J. 1977).

² Parties participating in the election include: Islamic Unity Development Party (PPP), non-Islamic parties such as Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI), and joint Secretary of Functional Groups (Golkar). Among these, Golkar is the controlling party approved by the state (Freedman, A. L. 2006).

In Myanmar, uncompetitive political system gives room for a repressive regime. In Myanmar, there is neither acceptance of civil society nor opposition party. Oppositionists find it virtually impossible to get their voices in Myanmar (Zin and Joseph 2012). The lack of effective opposition parties and civil society poses a barrier for democratic consolidation in Myanmar (Howard 2002). Initially, the military junta established the Revolution Council (RC). Subsequently, with the introduction of “Burmese Way to Socialism”, Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) was created in order to win public support. Following the incident in the mid of 1980s, RC and BSPP came in new names of State Law and Order Restoration (SLORC) and National Unity Party (NUP). Burmese military junta never recognized any other political parties (Charney 2009). Opposition party and civic participation were considered as a threat for the military junta.

To summarize, the main difference between the form of government in Myanmar and Indonesia is that the former enjoys a monopoly of power while the latter, though affiliated with the military, is mainly controlled by civilian government. This has a profound implication on the role of civil society and different patterns of political change in Myanmar and Indonesia.

Another reason for the weak civil society is a lack of consensus and unity in civil society. Some veteran politicians³ still expected that a multi-party election and a power transfer

from the military junta to the civilian government would be executed as the military had promised (Charney 2009). Moreover, although students protest against the military government involves the participation of other civil societies and unions including actors, artists, lawyers, housewives, no groups were ready to form an interim government to replace BSPP and to lead the country. While different plans were disagreed upon, the military took advantage of the weak civil society to stage a coup on 18th September 1998 and the country came under the control of the military again (Charney 2009).

The point is that when BSPP government went wrong, instead of taking its leadership in mass mobilization and establishment of an interim government in place of military junta, Burmese civil society was weakened by disagreement and disintegration. In reality, no civil society or union was taking advantage of a power hole and leading the country. This is explicable when bureaucratic structuring in Myanmar and Indonesia is considered. Unlike Ne Win-led BSPP government, skillful bureaucrats and acknowledged elites were appreciated in Suharto-led New Order (Carnegie 2010).

Role of Economic Development

The most significant failure of BSPP government lies in its economic misdirection. With the terrible legacy by Tin Pe, Burmese economy was more deteriorated by the

³ Veteran politicians, together with student representatives, had a discussion on the establishment of an interim government in foreign embassies in Rangoon. Subsequently, a meeting was convened on 13th-14th

transformation from Aung Gyi's import-substitution industrialization⁴ to Tin Pe's Marxist-oriented economy to serve Burmese Way to Socialism (Charney 2009). The latter focuses on agricultural loans, land reclamation, and nationalization to the local level. The centralized control of the economy on the means of production and distribution restrained the dynamics of the middle class.

This policy fails in two senses. First, the state-controlled economy discouraged productivity of nationalized industries as well as limited people participation in decision-making. Myanmar, which had been a rice-exporter, ran out of rice and was filled with a burden of national debt owing to decreasing export (Charney 2009). On 5th September 1987, demonetization of 25, 35 and 75-kyat currency notes was introduced. Consequently, the financial circulation went wrong when 60% to 80% of currency could not be used. Inflation went on when rice price increased by 700 per cent than the governmental rate. In addition, despite the shortage of goods, there was an unfair distribution among the elites and the mass. As a result, Myanmar was listed to be a "Least Developed Country" in 1987 (Charney 2009).

In Indonesia, Sukarno's socialist-led strategy was followed by Suharto's liberal policy which has positive impacts on Indonesian economy. The government gave support for private sector, developed semi-processed and manufacturing industries. In an open economy, foreign investment was facilitated with several

incentive programs. Additionally, Indonesian economic development is attributed to Repelita, an economic program led by a group of foreign-educated

September 1998. The politicians were asked to set aside their disagreement to facilitate the establishment of an interim government within 2 days. At that time, even though former Prime Minister U Nu stood up for his own appointment and asked for support for his own government, not many people took belief in his leadership any more.

The policy contributes to open up the economy through support for private sector and foreign investment. Practically United Nations announcement aimed at the acceptance of low-interest loan from foreign countries for Myanmar in this difficult condition. technocrats and the increase price of world oil (Freedman 2006)⁴. Consequently, the fruit was an annual economic growth rate of 5.4% in the 1970s, Indonesia being the highest in ASEAN countries and nearly reaching the standard of newly-industrialized countries. Supported by the military, Suharto-led New Order managed the economy very well until Asian Financial Crisis.

The incident of financial Crisis counts because the literature on modernization theory points out that during economic stagnation, people lose confidence in the authoritarian regime and are willing to form a new government that is able to lead the country out of the turmoil. Following the the IMF consultation, the government closed 16 banks,

⁴ Repelita was executed under the guidance of IGGI Inter Governmental Group on Indonesia, sometimes called Berkeley mafias.

increased interest rate up to 50% to save rupiah currency. This resulted in the closing down of small banks, unavoidable inflation of 80%, and the falling of rupiah currency from 24,000 to the lowest point of 17,000 to a dollar. Being blamed for their better wealth accumulation than Indonesian, Chinese were attacked throughout the country. Being accused of unable to control the riot, Suharto was under the pressure of students' protest to resign. Suharto was also abandoned by key ministers and the military (Freedman 2006). Facing a national turmoil, Suharto resigned on 21st May 1998. Apparently, economic crisis paved a way for a new regime in power. In addition to this, to understand the role of political leaders, it is crucial to discuss the behavior of Indonesian government in the Financial Crisis 1997 in the perspectives of the Strategic Choice Theory.

Role of Leader's Policy

In Myanmar, it is required that all civilian members in Myanmar need to have military background. Hence, the voice of civilian societies in Myanmar was so weak that the military controlled the result of the election in 1990. Alternatively, following Suharto's resignation, the military leader decided to develop civilian leadership by strengthening its bureaucracy. To elaborate on this point, after Suharto resigned, Angkatan Bersenjata Republik Indonesia (ABRI) was renamed as Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI) in October 1998 to limit its involvement in the government. The new government continued to deprive TNI of its responsibility of security defense and assigned it to the national police force in April 1999. This decision aimed at limiting the expansion of the

military and avoiding their political alliance (Carnegie 2010). In January 1999, TNI only won 38 seats in the DPR (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat – Lower House of Parliament of Indonesia) and eventually played out of the DPR. At the local level, there was a decline in the representation of TNI from 20% to only 10%. Moreover, in the 1999 general election, TNI stayed neutral and did not recognize Golkar as its political party. The authority of Indonesian military was gradually weakened.

Suharto's policy to protect his economic interest also leads to his resignation. Facing the currency crisis due to the devaluation of rupiah, Suharto asked for IMF assistance on the condition of limiting governmental support for his companies, reducing expenditure, closing insolvent banks, and stop providing support for food and energy (Freedman 2006). These two rescue packages were not effectively implemented because Suharto focused on protecting the companies controlled by his families and his allies. One example is that 16 insolvent banks had been closed as IMF required and then were allowed to re-open under new names. At that time, increasing energy price triggered mass riots. The mass were angry because while they suffered the consequences of the subsidy removal, Suharto's family and allies benefited from corruption. The demonstration starting in January 1998 soon escalated and became a pressure to ask for Suharto's resignation in April and May.

The argument here is that economic crisis leads to the separation in political leaders. First, receiving IMF assistance, Suharto's government lost its unity because of

disagreement on whether to accept IMF's conditions, and how to execute the policies. The escalation of the riots and Suharto's inability to manage it made his allies lose confidence in his leadership. All key officers⁵ resigned and abandoned Suharto. The House Speaker Harmoko insisted on carrying out the impeachment of Suharto. General Wiranto gave up his responsibility of security defense in Jakarta. Eventually, under the pressure of the public and political elites, Suharto decided to resign on 21st May 1998 after 32 years in power (Freedman 2006). The collapse of Suharto's regime served as a condition for public election in subsequent years.

No Bourgeoisie, No Democracy

In regards of democratic transition from authoritarian rule and by quoting Moore's 'No Bourgeoisie, No Democracy' (Moore 1966), the middle class tend to come together in interest groups or associations to promote their interests. In doing so, they are asking for an open, accountable, responsive, and democratic government.

The nationalization policy to serve Burmese Way to Socialism prevented the wealth accumulation for middle class. Moreover, the law did not allow the gathering of more than 3 people and posed a barrier for civil society to disseminate information to mobilize the mass (Howard 2002). The isolated economy in

Myanmar minimized the competence of civil society and prevented their participation in decision-making towards democratic regime.

Unlike Myanmar, Suharto's liberal economic strategy and corporatist authoritarianism benefited the middle class to some extents (Dick 1985). Besides, the middle class of an oil exporting country reaped big revenues from the high price of oil in the 1970s (MacIntyre 1991). Therefore, middle class were gaining their voices and bargaining power with the political elites (Carnegie 2010). With the help of free press and media, these interest groups could raise their growing demands to the state (Carnegie 2010). It was Suharto's insensible "Strategic Choice" to conform to IMF's conditions that brought unexpected changes into the economic situation and gave them a reason to go against his government which no longer the safeguard of their interests. After Suharto's resignation, Indonesian middle class raised a bigger voice in the establishment of a new government by participating in the decision-making process. Under the supervision of this literate middle class who are the majority of the population, political representatives apparently need to be more competent in their performances. In a participatory system in which the middle class can have a voice in their polls and play a role in governmental scrutiny, Indonesian democratization should be consolidated.

⁵ To make it worse, following leading economist ministers Akbar Tanjung and Ginandjar Kartasamita, all 14 economic ministers resigned (Freedman, 2006). At the same time, the House Speaker Harmoko insisted on carrying out the impeachment of Suharto. General Wiranto gave up his responsibility of security defense in Jakarta.

Conclusion

Myanmar and Indonesia have been among states under military control in the Southeast Asia. Following the resignation of its leaders, while Burmese military still remains dominant, Indonesia became the world's third largest democratic nation. The paper examines the democratization in two countries and pinpoints the reason why authoritarian regime survived in Myanmar until now, while it collapsed in Indonesia in 1998. This paper tries to justify different outcomes of democratization process, and the implications for future democracy in Myanmar. To answer the questions, the paper draws upon different theories, including Authoritarianism theory, Democratization theory, Modernization theory, Strategic Choice theory, and Social Class theory. In this way, the paper explores five main factors influencing the results of democratization, including the role of military, the strength of civil society, economic development level, leaders' policy, and the role of social class. The paper comes up with the arguments as follows:

Firstly, while Myanmar military junta is completely monopoly of power, the military in Indonesia only holds a certain degree of authority within the government. Secondly, a lack of a unified civilian society in Myanmar neither led the regime change nor brought the military down. There was no organization to replace the authoritarian government when there was a power vacuum. In Indonesia, strong civil society is a condition for its successful democratization. The military in Indonesia chose to encourage the emergence of a civilian

government by recognizing the existence of opposition party, and strengthening bureaucracies. Thirdly, economic deterioration in Myanmar triggered political instability and paved an end to democracy. When the Asian Financial Crisis 1997 struck Indonesia, the disapproval of Suharto's government from strong civil society and his key officers brought a pressure on his resignation. Fourthly, in terms of the role of leaders' policy, it is shown that in the Asian Financial Crisis 1997, his wrong "Strategic Choice" made the majority of population go against him and go for a new government that support their economic interest. Lastly, when it comes to the role of social class, the declining economy in Myanmar repressed the development of the middle class who should be the main players in democratization. Whereas, Indonesian middle class appeared to be beneficiaries of Suharto-led New Order and played a key role in the supervision of an accountable of a new government.

As Huntington (1991) states that many achievements are necessary for a democracy. In the case of Indonesia, two consecutive free and several fair elections and a transfer of power from incumbent opposition are fruits in Indonesian democratic consolidation. Therefore, it is still a long way until all the substances of democracy for Myanmar are all collected. Learning from the experiences of the world and regional countries, Myanmar people are struggling for their democratic country. The history of democratization in Myanmar continues to be in focus for future academic research.

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