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URBANIZATION AND URBAN CONFLICT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Hans-Dieter Evers

URBANIZATION IS ONE of the most rapid processes of social change throughout the world. Considerable social and demographic transformations accompanied the growth of the world urban population that more than doubled between 1950 and 1960 (from about 313 to about 655 million people). By 1975 the world urban population will probably be well above the 1,000 million line.

Not too long ago urbanization and urban growth were seen as an indicator of modernization and progress. In 1958, Daniel Lerner could still claim that rapid urbanization is the pre-condition for modernization and development: "It is the transfer of population from scattered hinterlands to urban centers that stimulates the needs and provides the conditions needed for 'take off' towards wide-spread participation. . . . Cities produce the machine tools of modernization."¹ Today scholars have become less optimistic about urbanization. Cities are no longer seen as the centers of change and progress but rather as areas of crises. Not only New York and London, but Calcutta, Rio de Janeiro and Jakarta are seen as the centers of social problems, illiteracy, disease, crime, and poverty. Nevertheless, differences between the urbanization process in Europe and North America and in the cities of the developing world are considerable.

Before discussing the state and process of urbanization in Southeast Asia, we have to turn to some problems of definition and measurement. Leaving aside all cultural and social structural definitions of urbanization and concentrating for the moment only on crude population statistics, the following distinctions are necessary. Urbanization refers first of all to a state of affairs, namely, the percentage of population living in urban areas in a nation state. Secondly, it refers to a process, namely, the increase in the total urban population. This latter distinction, though seemingly of no great importance, is very relevant to our discus-

¹ Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (New York: The Free Press, 1958), p. 61.

sion. Most statistics on urban population refer to the absolute increase in persons residing in cities. It is safe to say that there is hardly any city of more than 100,000 population in Southeast Asia that has not increased its total population considerably over the past 50 years or so. However, as population in rural areas also increases rapidly, the proportion of the population in a given territory living in urban areas increases at a much slower pace or even remains stagnant at times. Though urban populations may mushroom, the rural-urban population balance may shift only slowly.

To judge these alternations in the rural-urban balance, readjustments in administrative boundaries and definitions used in national statistics have to be taken into account. Some statistics use a purely legal definition to count the urban population, whereas others use an arbitrary figure and regard any settlement with a population of more than 20,000 or of more than 100,000 as urban.

Difficulties in this regard become apparent from the following examples. South Vietnamese statistics, for instance, use a legal definition. There are consequently towns of 2,000 inhabitants that enter the statistics as urban populations. On the other hand, there are villages of 10,000 inhabitants that are counted as rural. Without investigating these cases further, we can assume that the large villages are probably more urban from any point of view than the so-called towns.

In the Philippines, too, the legal definition is used. Because of this the urban population is probably over-estimated by up to 25%. There are political reasons for this overestimation. Enlarging the city boundaries and incorporating large rural areas increase the political power of the urban government. Mayors of Philippine cities, who play an important part in Philippine national politics, have therefore tried to enlarge their urban areas.

Another example is the city-state of Singapore. According to official statistics, the urban population of the State of Singapore declined from 72.5% in 1947 to 63.1% in 1957, and this despite rapid urbanization. The reason for this statistical decline was that the city limits were already filled up and the rapid population growth took place outside the city limits in villages that became suburbs. For 1970, international statistics classify Singapore as 100% urban despite the fact that 20.5% of the land area of Singapore is still used for agriculture, another 27.4% for forest, marsh etc., and only 31.4% is built-up and strictly speaking urban. From the point of view of human resources, however, the 100% figure is more convincing, for only 0.6% of the labor force is engaged in agriculture.

So far we have discussed only substantive questions of definitions. Gross inaccuracies that haunt Southeast Asian statistics have to be added. Urbanization is a very complex phenomenon and statistics may confuse the issues if not used with extreme caution.

We may now turn to a discussion of major trends and patterns of

urbanization in Southeast Asia. Compared with other regions of the world, Southeast Asia is very little urbanized. Only Africa south of the Sahara shows lower figures. In 1970, between 70 and 80% of the Southeast Asian population could still be classified as rural. Until recently in most Southeast Asian countries (with some notable exceptions) there was no marked decline of the rural population. For Southeast Asia as a whole, roughly 86% of the population could be classified as rural in 1950 and about 80% in 1970.

The deviant cases are West Malaysia, where only 64% of the population is rural, the city state of Singapore with, perhaps, 1% rural population, and the Sultanate of Brunei, which is only 56% rural because of a large number of urban workers in the oil industry in a relatively small overall population. All other Southeast Asian countries show rural population figures between 75 and 85%. Nevertheless, the total urban population has increased from about 23 million in 1950 to an estimated 57 million in 1970.² This means that the urban population more than doubled in two decades.

Most of this urban population growth was, however, concentrated in large cities. If we exclude urban areas with less than 100,000 inhabitants, we can note an increase from 7 to 12% of the total population from 1950 to 1970. From these general figures we can draw the following conclusions. The degree of urbanization is still low in Southeast Asia, though in absolute numbers the urban population has grown substantially in the past twenty years. Typical urban problems are on the increase, especially in the large metropolitan centres. But considering the relatively slow pace at which urbanization has been proceeding, we have to expect a much more rapid increase in urban problems with rapid urbanization in the near future. Despite economic growth throughout the area or, perhaps, just because of economic development, the urban crisis is still to come.

There is also a growing trend of population concentration in Southeast Asian countries that already have a highly centralized city population. This becomes apparent when we compare the primate cities with the next largest city in each country. Bangkok is, for instance, more than 25 times larger than the next largest city in Thailand, Chiangmai. Similar comparisons can be made between Rangoon and Mandalay, Manila and Cebu, Saigon and Hue, Jakarta and Surabaya and, to a lesser extent, Kuala Lumpur and Georgetown. If we compare this trend towards concentration with the urbanization experience of European countries, the difference becomes apparent. A comparison between Berlin and Munich or between Berlin and the urban conglomeration of the Ruhr district and the difference between the London and the Manchester industrial areas never showed the extreme population concentration

² Riaz Hassan, "Rural Urban Migration and Urbanization in Southeast Asia," *Asia Research Bulletin* 1 (1972), pp. 544-546.

we find in present Southeast Asia. This trend towards concentration continues. With the notable exceptions of some smaller towns that have profited from increased economic connections across borders, such as Pekan Baru in Indonesia or Haadyai in Southern Thailand, the metropolitan cities in most Southeast Asian countries have grown much faster than smaller towns. A much more detailed study would be necessary to bring out the differences between countries and areas. In general terms we might say, however, that the trend towards population concentration and increasing inequalities in access to modern urban institutions continues.

It is often overlooked that most of the urban population growth so far derives from natural population increase. Though there is considerable rural-urban migration it is, in general, not yet excessive. Most migrants tend to come from the immediate vicinity of the big cities or from a few selected migration-prone areas like West Sumatra in Indonesia.³ There also appears to be a prevalence of step migration, though it is difficult to say whether step migration—that is, migration from rural areas to small towns, from small towns to bigger towns, from big towns to cities—is on the increase or decrease. Studies from Thailand⁴ and Indonesia⁵ seem to point in this direction.

Push-factors seem to be more important in rural-urban migration as industrialization is slow and relatively few people are drawn into the urban areas through job offers. A notable exception to this is Singapore, which in 1974 employed some 70,000 workers from Malaysia. Most of these temporary migrants probably originate from Malaysian small towns rather than rural areas. The future intensity of rural-urban migration will therefore be influenced primarily by the situation in rural areas like landlessness, land tenure⁶ and population increase. An extreme case for push-factors and rural-urban migration is, of course, South Vietnam, where the large-scale U.S. bombing and the war have led to forced migration. But also regional political disturbances have led to cityward migration. The Dar'ul Islam uprising in Indonesia, for instance, was probably a major force behind migration to Jakarta and Bandung during the 1950s.

From the background of these general data on the process of urbanization in Southeast Asia we shall now turn to a discussion of the changes that are taking place in the cities themselves.

³ Mochtar Naim, "Merantau: Minangkabau Voluntary Migration" (Ph. D. thesis, Department of Sociology, University of Singapore, 1973).

⁴ L. Sternstein, "A First Study of Migration in the Greater Bangkok Metropolitan Area," *Pacific Viewpoint* 12:1, 1971, pp. 41-67, and S. Goldstein, "Urbanization in Thailand, 1947-1967," *Demography* 8:2, 1971, pp. 205-224.

⁵ Hans-Dieter Evers, "Preliminary Notes on Migration Patterns of a Sumatran Town," *Sumatra Research Bulletin* 2:1, 1972, pp. 18-23.

⁶ Hans-Dieter Evers, "Urban Expansion and Landownership in Underdeveloped Societies," *Urban Affairs Quarterly*, 11, (September 1975).

The Changing Social Structure of Southeast Asian Cities

In this process of Southeast Asian urbanization, social changes have certainly occurred, but they have not been extraordinary if compared to other areas of the world. Both social structural changes and the urbanization rate as discussed earlier have proceeded at a relatively slow pace. Though cities have grown, their occupational structure has not changed very much. This phenomenon, which is particularly visible in smaller and medium towns, has prompted observers of the urban scene to call the process urban involution rather than urban revolution.⁷ Urban anthropologists in particular have pointed to the relative traditionality of Southeast Asian cities. Edward Bruner has analyzed the maintenance of traditional social organization among the Bataks of Medan and more recently in Bandung, West Java. Lucian Pye has claimed that with increasing rural-urban migration more traditional forms of social control were reintroduced in Rangoon.⁸ Provencher describes how his delusion that Kampung Baru, a Malay area in Kuala Lumpur, "was a rural community dissolved quickly, while the impression that it was 'traditional' remained and grew indelible,"⁹ and in my own study of Padang, West Sumatra, I was able to show how traditional patterns of landownership could be maintained despite the pressures of urbanization.¹⁰ In more comprehensive studies on Southeast Asian cities in general, McGee has also pointed to the "persistence of the complex social, ethnic, and economic divisions of the city,"¹¹ and Dwyer expresses doubts whether the title of his book, "The City as a Center of Change in Asia," is really appropriate.¹² Despite these well-founded earlier studies, it can be argued that Southeast Asian cities are about to undergo a profound change in their social structure. Though traditional structures are going to linger on for a long time to come, a basic structural and ecological rearrangement seems to be in the making. I shall try to point out the basic lines of change in the social ecology of Southeast Asian cities and then speculate on the likely impact on city

⁷ W. R. Armstrong and T. G. McGee, "Revolutionary Change and the Third World City: A Theory of Urban Involution," *Civilizations* 18 (1969), pp. 353-376, and Hans-Dieter Evers, "Urban Involution: The Social Structure of Southeast Asian Towns" (Working Paper No. 2, Department of Sociology, University of Singapore, 1972; Indonesian version in *Prisma* III:2, 1974, pp. 73-82).

⁸ Lucian W. Pye, *Politics, Personality and Nation Building: Burma's Search for Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), p. 93.

⁹ R. Provencher, *Two Malay Worlds: Interaction in Rural and Urban Settings* (Berkeley: University of California, Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 1971), p. 7.

¹⁰ Hans-Dieter Evers, "Changing Patterns of Minangkabau Urban Landownership," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land-, en Volkenkunde*, 131:1 (1975), pp. 86-110.

¹¹ T. G. McGee, *The Southeast Asian City: A Social Geography of the Primate Cities of Southeast Asia* (London: Bell, 1967), p. 100.

¹² D. J. Dwyer, ed., *The City as a Centre of Change in Asia* (Hongkong: Hongkong University Press, 1972), p. IX.

politics. To engage in this broad perspective it is necessary to go back into the historical development of Southeast Asian cities.

Colonial urban structure: It is perhaps significant that all major Southeast Asian cities are of colonial origin. Not Jogjakarta but Jakarta, not Pegu but Rangoon, became the capitals of Indonesia and Burma; not Melaka, or Kuala Kangsar, or Sri Menanti, but Kuala Lumpur, became the capital of Malaysia. These colonial cities, however, were planned and grew on the assumption that race and ethnic origin were the main principles of societal organization. Singapore, for instance, from its foundation in 1819, was laid out in terms of a local consolidation of ethnic groups. Its founder, Sir Stamford Raffles, decreed that there should be separate quarters for Chinese, Indians, Malays, Buginese and, of course, Europeans. The British administrative officers were even instructed to settle the Chinese by speech group.¹³ In the 17th and 18th centuries, Batavia, the capital of the Netherlands East Indies, had separate kampungs for Dutch, Ambonese, Bandanese, Buginese, Bimanese, Balinese, Butonese, Javanese, Sundanese, Florinese, Mandarese, Makassarese, Sumbawans, Chinese, Moors, etc. The former main office of the Dutch East Indies Company for Sumatra, Padang, had a somewhat less cosmopolitan but, nevertheless, impressive differentiation of ethnic groups with separate areas for the Dutch, Minangkabau, Javanese, Mentawai and Nias Islanders. Similar descriptions could be provided for almost any colonial city in Southeast Asia. These racially segregated residential patterns were disturbed and put under severe strain by heavy immigration from abroad. The peak of this migration came from China in the 1920s. From 1895 to 1927 Singapore and West Malaysia received six million Chinese immigrants, 360,000 of them during 1927.

Similar streams of migration reached Rangoon (primarily from India), Bangkok, Saigon-Cholon, Manila, the West Coast of Malaya, and the Javanese cities of Jakarta, Semarang, and Surabaya. Though the "chinatowns" of colonial cities grew and sometimes engulfed the former European quarters whose residents had moved into the suburbs, the ethnic residential patterns remained basically intact up to the present. The pattern became more intricate and involuted, but its basic principle of ethnic separation was maintained. This process in general has been described as the development of a plural society in which groups mix, particularly in the market place, but do not combine or integrate in a racial melting pot. In fact, just the contrary tended to happen in some instances where already assimilated groups were separated again by the infusion of new migrants. The so-called Baba-Chinese in Malaya are a case in point. They spoke Malay, wore a particular type of Malay dress and led a distinct style of life which was neither wholly Chinese

¹³ C. R. Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore 1819-1867* (Kuala Lumpur/Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1965), pp. 83-84.

nor wholly Malay. With the growth of nationalism in China and the infusion of new migrants, the Chinese language was reintroduced and an awareness of Chinese identity became prevalent.

The system of ethnic segregation was combined with occupational specialization both between and within ethnic groups. Though there was a concentration of persons of high social status and low social status in respective groups, there was no complete overlap between ethnicity and social class. The majority of middle-class persons tended to consist of Chinese, but there were many lower-class Chinese who were prepared to starve their way to prosperity. Each ethnic group thus had its own status hierarchy. There was the coolie and the towkay Chinese businessman), the landless, indigenous Chinese migrant and the aristocrat, the Indian shop attendant and the importer. As ethnic residential separation was the guiding principle, people of the same ethnic group but different socio-economic status tended to reside in close proximity. Starting in the last decades of colonial rule in Southeast Asia, and accelerating after independence, profound changes have begun to take place.

From race to class: The basic change that is taking place in the Southeast Asian city is a slow dissolution of ethnic segregation and an increase of segregation by social class. Even where ethnic boundaries were maintained there appears to have been a segregation by class within the ethnic boundaries of earlier city ecology. It is extremely difficult to prove this process by using census statistics since most Southeast Asian countries do not publish data on ethnic groups in line with an ideology of ethnic integration. In those countries in which data on race are collected—for example, Malaysia and Singapore—city boundaries and within-city units of aggregation have been changed so frequently as to render reliable comparisons between census years almost impossible. We have therefore to rely on case studies, on our own observations, and on historical materials to substantiate our hypothesis.

The change from ethnic to class segregation can be traced back to the beginning of the post-colonial era. With the transition from colonial to independent status, the earlier colonial power elite have slowly vacated their positions and high-status residence areas. The spacious, colonial bungalows in their park-like areas were taken over by the new indigenous elite, both commercial and political. At the same time the local civil service was expanded tremendously. Though expatriate Asians tended to be discriminated against in the recruitment for the expanding administrative service, a mixing of ethnic groups nevertheless occurred. This became important for the spatial structure of Southeast Asian cities when the expanding civil service started to support itself by housing schemes for government officials. Examples of this are the satellite town of Petaling Jaya near Kuala Lumpur, or Kebajoran in Jakarta. These new housing schemes tended to be racially integrated; rank and

position in the civil service, rather than race, became the determining factor for residential allocation.

With economic development and occupational differentiation, a set of new positions was created that was not traditionally defined and consequently open to all ethnic groups, though here as in the civil service a certain discrimination occurred, in this case, however, against the indigenous population. Nevertheless, new large-scale organizations and national corporations, without racial preference in recruitment, created working-class as well as executive areas which were separated by socio-economic status rather than by race. At the same time the city population grew both through migration and through its own natural population increase. As urban expansion into new areas was often hampered by an already densely-settled rural area or by natural boundaries—for instance, the swamps surrounding Jakarta or the sea encircling Singapore—population increase tended to fill the gaps between formerly segregated ethnic groups. The population explosion due to high birth rates might thus be better termed “transpllosion” in the urban context. Ecological invasion by one ethnic group into the territory of another ethnic group became frequent. Population increase and other social processes have intensified the pressure on urban land and have led, in the 1970s, to waves of land speculation and spiralling land prices.¹⁴ The increase of land prices, however, was not the same in all areas and the value of land thus became very much differentiated. Certain favored areas were removed from the reach of lower and middle classes and remnants of low income groups yielded to the pressure of urban developers, higher land taxes, and the temptation of higher land prices. This process as well as a general tendency to reduce the number of servants and gardeners living on the premises of upper-class families increased residential segregation by socio-economic status rather than race.

In some cities, particularly Singapore, low-cost housing schemes for lower income groups of all races were implemented. This, in principle, laudable enterprise led to a certain degree of racial residential integration, but at the same time to residential segregation by class.

All these processes have led to a decrease in racial segregation but simultaneously to an increase in segregation by income, wealth, and occupation, that is, by social class. Upper-class areas are no longer occupied by European expatriates alone, but also by local businessmen, Chinese industrialists, indigenous generals and higher civil servants—in other words, by a racially-mixed upper class. The crowded central city areas may still be divided into Chinese, Indian, Indonesian, Malay, Vietnamese, and other quarters, whatever the overall racial composition of the country concerned might be. But the wealthy members of the respective communities have moved out. In the largest Southeast Asian city, Jakarta, “different groups have settled in significantly different pro-

¹⁴ Evers, “Urban Expansion.”

portions in various sections of the city, that choice being largely related, however, to their occupations and socio-economic status."¹⁵

With this change in the social ecology of Southeast Asian cities, the patterns of conflict are also likely to change. While race riots and conflicts between ethnic groups plagued Southeast Asian cities from their beginnings, a conflict based on class lines seems to be more likely in the future. Though we do not wish to propose any geographical determinism and argue that the social ecology of a city determines its political and social structure, we nevertheless suggest that far-reaching ecological changes will not fail to have an impact on the political and social life of an urban society.

Conclusion: Patterns of Urban Conflict

The change in the social ecological structure of Southeast Asian cities has had, I would like to hypothesize, a decisive impact on the perception of the social structure of the city by its inhabitants. In other words, the urban population transposition has changed the image of the city and its society considerably. The urban transposition meant a rather sudden social expansion of urban society. Whereas urban society was formerly divided into watertight compartments of a plural social structure, the interaction barriers between ethnic groups have been reduced by spatial proximity. In his study of a small Javanese town, Clifford Geertz bemoaned the lack of integration of various ethnic and cultural groups within that town. Geertz used the term "hollow town" to describe the situation where an urban society is not an integrated social structure but rather a combination of small societies.¹⁶ With the process described above there is a growing awareness of common problems, an increase in urban empathy. Urban dwellers realize that they can move out of the confines of both residential area and occupation to occupy new social and residential positions. As the traditional ethnic monopolization of occupations is breaking down, occupational opportunities are, in theory, opened for members of all ethnic groups. At the same time, rising unemployment rates may reduce the actual opportunities of upward occupational mobility expected by a large proportion of the workforce. The potential for open conflict is enhanced because competition for jobs between members of different ethnic groups is now combined with competition for living space. Moving into an area that was formerly defined as the territory of one particular group according to the traditional divisions in the plural society city, as well as moving into an occupational area that was formerly monopolized by a particular ethnic

¹⁵ L. Castles, "The Ethnic Profile of Djakarta," *Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY), no. 3 (1967), pp. 153-204.

¹⁶ Clifford Geertz, *The Social History of an Indonesian Town* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1965).

group, is interpreted in the social consciousness as invasion and leads to defense reactions.

The conflict situation is enhanced by the consolidation of a multi-ethnic upper class as analyzed above and elsewhere.¹⁷ The closure of the upper class and its increasing tendency towards self-recruitment reduces the chances for upward mobility, but at the same time it provides a reference group for all ethnic groups in the lower class. Seeing a member of one's own ethnic group passing by in an expensive car in the direction of the upper class residential area raises mobility aspirations without increasing mobility chances. Resulting frustration leads to conflict, but this conflict can no longer be channelled directly against members of one's own elite living in the same residential quarters as earlier. Members of the upper class have moved out and reside separately from low status members of their own ethnic group. Very visible, however, are persons of different ethnic origin who compete for the same territory and for the same jobs. The results are frustration riots in the lower class areas themselves. This is clearly seen in two major race riots that occurred recently in Southeast Asia. During the May 13th incident in Malaysia in 1969, no conflict occurred between members of the upper class. In the riots following the visit of the Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka to Jakarta in 1973, Indonesian generals and Chinese big businessmen continued to cooperate. Lacking effective political leadership, the lower classes in the two cities could not turn against a political enemy. In a case where political leadership was provided, namely, in Bangkok in 1973, a coalition between students, intellectuals and urban youth was able to topple the ruling military elite.

Early in 1975 Malaysian students came out in large number to demonstrate in support of peasant unrest in Baling, Northern Malaysia. A large number of students and several staff members of local universities, both Malay and Chinese, were arrested and imprisoned without trial. The Malaysian multi-racial political elite tried to use racial arguments to divide the protest movement, which was also multi-racial and supported by villagers and workers alike.

Our above analysis has shown a trend towards a spatial reorganization of Southeast Asian cities. Residential patterns will be more and more based on income, wealth, and status. The typical socio-ecological structure will show a differentiation into upper class areas, civil service and professional quarters, lower middle class housing estates and squatters settlements, instead of "Kampung China," "Kampung Java" and other ethnic group differentiations. There is also the possibility of an intensification of urban conflict, either organized in the forms of union-led strikes or conflicts between class-based political parties or stu-

¹⁷ Hans-Dieter Evers, "Group Conflict and Class Formation in Southeast Asia" in H. D. Evers, ed., *Modernization in Southeast Asia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 108-191.

dent movements, or unorganized in the form of riots, which may take the form of frustration riots between ethnic groups.

Southeast Asian governments have so far reacted to the threat of urban violence by increasing political pressure against any political opposition that might challenge their power by providing leadership to urban masses. Given the present composition of most Southeast Asian governments, greater emphasis on class rather than race conflict in an interpretation of the situation would seem to be warranted.

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