

Governance Beyond the State: Clientelism, Fiscal Populism, and Reform Challenges in Southeast Asian Democracies

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Received : January 30, 2025

Accepted : March 23, 2025

Published : April 30, 2025

Citation: Taufiqurokhman, Ningsih, W.M., & Yusuf, M., (2025). Governance Beyond the State: Clientelism, Fiscal Populism, and Reform Challenges in Southeast Asian Democracies. *Politeia : Journal of Public Administration and Political Science and International Relations*, 3(2), 128-140.

ABSTRACT: This study investigates the pervasive role of informal political institutions in Southeast Asian governance, focusing on the entrenchment of clientelism, political dynasties, and bureaucratic patronage. Drawing on comparative political economy approaches, the research demonstrates that despite formal democratic frameworks, informal systems significantly shape governance outcomes. The objective is to identify how institutional weaknesses, elite continuity, and fiscal populism reinforce informality, and to assess the prospects for reform through anti dynasty legislation and civil service improvements. Methodologically, the study integrates qualitative analysis of political networks and informal practices with quantitative insights from fiscal and electoral data across Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and other Southeast Asian states. Findings reveal that weak bureaucratic systems allow informal networks to dominate service delivery and political access. Political dynasties benefit from institutional voids and economic inequality, consolidating power through electoral dominance and intergenerational succession. Fiscal populism exacerbates these trends by diverting resources toward short term patronage schemes. In contrast, countries like Vietnam, which have pursued fiscal reforms with strong oversight, illustrate pathways for weakening informalism through inclusive, formalized state interventions. The study concludes that while informal institutions remain deeply embedded, targeted reforms such as professionalizing civil service and legislating against dynastic politics can strengthen accountability and institutional performance. Long term success hinges on the alignment of reform efforts with cultural, political, and fiscal realities across Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Political Patronage, Informal Institutions, Southeast Asia, Political Dynasties, Clientelism, Fiscal Populism, Governance Reform.



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INTRODUCTION

Informal political institutions remain resilient in Southeast Asia, creating a paradox in governance. Despite democratic reforms and administrative modernization, practices such as clientelism, nepotism, and patronage continue to influence political outcomes. Rather than disappearing, these

practices interact with formal institutions, shaping governance across national and subnational levels. The persistence of such systems reflects not merely a failure of institutional design, but a deliberate entrenchment of political strategies that serve elite interests.

The roots of political patronage in the region can be traced back to colonial and post-independence transitions, where centralized state structures were often weak, and governance relied heavily on personal relationships and loyalties. Over time, these structures evolved into more systematic forms of clientelism, wherein political elites dispense material benefits such as employment, public services, or direct financial assistance in exchange for electoral loyalty. The rise of political dynasties has further institutionalized this exchange, enabling elite families to dominate political offices across generations and consolidate control over public resources and policymaking processes (Purdey, 2016; Setyaningrum & Saragih, 2019).

Simultaneously, informal institutions have come to fill governance voids, particularly in rural or peripheral areas where state presence is limited. In these contexts, networks of kinship and patronage serve as conduits for political and social mobilization, effectively substituting formal state functions. While such arrangements may provide short term stability and continuity in leadership, they also create structural barriers to inclusive governance and accountability (Syauket & Wijanarko, 2021). The overlapping of informal and formal systems generates complex political environments where personal allegiances often supersede rule based decision making, undermining the legitimacy of institutions tasked with equitable service delivery (Fatimatuazzahra & Dewi, 2021).

Political dynasties consolidate power through intergenerational succession, electoral dominance, and control over fiscal resources. This reduces competition, entrenches socio-economic hierarchies, and diminishes the quality of representation (Geys & Smith, 2017; Mariana & Husin, 2017).

Fiscal policy, particularly in decentralized settings, has become an instrument for patronage. In Indonesia, for example, regional autonomy has enabled local political families to influence budgetary allocations for their benefit, frequently diverting resources from public priorities to politically expedient projects (Purwaningsih & Widodo, 2020). These patterns are not isolated; comparative studies highlight that weak oversight, combined with entrenched political interests, allows elites to manipulate fiscal tools to maintain clientelist networks, often at the expense of public accountability (Setyaningrum & Martani, 2018). Consequently, fiscal decentralization, while normatively appealing for local empowerment, may in practice deepen informalism when co-opted by entrenched elites (Fatimatuazzahra & Dewi, 2021).

Clientelism's resilience in Southeast Asia is further reinforced by cultural and institutional factors. Historical dependence on personal networks for access to services, especially in rural areas, has normalized clientelist exchanges. At the same time, weak institutional checks, limited bureaucratic capacity, and strategic political incentives prevent effective regulation of these practices (Cruz, 2018; Rey, 2023). These dynamics form a self-reinforcing cycle: political elites exploit institutional weaknesses to deliver selective benefits, while constituents continue to rely on personalistic channels to meet their needs (Fiva & Smith, 2018).

Theoretical frameworks have increasingly focused on the links between informality and elite control. Informal networks allow political families to circumvent formal constraints, facilitating the reproduction of power across generations. These elite arrangements often extend into bureaucratic and economic domains, where influence is exercised through relational rather than institutional means (Coppinolle, 2020). This consolidation of informal power not only perpetuates inequality but also inhibits the development of rule based governance. Informalism thus becomes both a symptom and a strategy of elite domination in Southeast Asian democracies (Yates, 2021).

This article argues that informal political institutions in Southeast Asia are not vestiges of underdevelopment but are instead purposefully maintained by dynastic elites and fiscal mechanisms that prioritize political loyalty over institutional integrity. The novelty of this study lies in its comparative framing, linking dynastic continuity, fiscal policy, and informal governance across three critical cases Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. By examining how these elements interact to reproduce informalism, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of political development in the region and offers insights into potential reform pathways aimed at dismantling entrenched elite structures.

METHOD

This study adopts a comparative political economy approach to examine how dynastic politics and fiscal policy reinforce informal institutions in Southeast Asia. The method is chosen because it allows the integration of macro-level fiscal analysis with micro-level case studies of elite networks. This dual perspective ensures both breadth and depth in understanding informal governance.

Drawing on established practices in comparative political economy research (Mendoza et al., 2022), this study adopts a mixed methods design that integrates both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Quantitative analysis is employed to detect macro level patterns in fiscal performance, governance quality, and the scale of informal economies. Simultaneously, qualitative methods including case studies and contextual interpretation are used to examine the influence of political dynasties and patronage networks on policy processes and administrative behavior. The integration of multiple data sources and analytical lenses allows for methodological triangulation, thereby strengthening the validity and comprehensiveness of the results (Purdey, 2016).

Quantitative data is sourced from internationally recognized and national datasets:

- World Bank Governance Indicators (e.g., voice and accountability, government effectiveness)
- National budget and expenditure reports (2000–2017)
- Estimates of informal economy size from the International Labour Organization (ILO), IMF, and local statistical bureaus
- Public finance metrics including fiscal deficit ratios, taxation structures, and social spending data

Qualitative data sources include:

- Electoral records and political biographies of dynastic families
- Field based case studies and ethnographic reports on clientelism
- Peer reviewed literature and academic commentary on political patronage and informal institutions
- Contributions from regional and indigenous political theorists addressing informal power dynamics (Dressel & Bunte, 2014)

To quantify dynastic power across legislative and executive branches, the study calculates several key indicators: (i) the ratio of dynastic politicians to total officeholders; (ii) the average number of generational transitions within political families; and (iii) the geographical concentration of dynastic strongholds. These indicators are complemented by qualitative coding of elite networks and their influence on public institutions. Advanced regression techniques, including fixed effects and multi-level models, are used to examine the association between dynastic prevalence and governance outcomes (Asako et al., 2015; Huan & Thambipillai, 2019). The study also uses cross validation from election archives, parliamentary records, and news databases to ensure accurate identification of familial political links (Prianto, 2016).

Fiscal populism is assessed using indicators such as fiscal deficits, tax-to-GDP ratios, and public spending composition. Case-based narratives are used to illustrate how these tools are mobilized for clientelist purposes (Yap, 2018).

- **Philippines:** Characterized by entrenched dynastic rule, fragmented party systems, and widespread patronage based bureaucracy, making it a strong case for high informal institutionalization.
- **Indonesia:** Offers a dynamic post Reformasi context with decentralization reforms that enable both institutional experimentation and elite entrenchment at the subnational level.
- **Vietnam:** A one party state with comparatively stronger bureaucratic discipline and merit based recruitment, serving as a partial contrast to more democratic yet clientelist prone systems.

These countries thus represent a range of institutional conditions from hybrid to highly informal, enabling nuanced cross case comparisons.

The study employs the following tools:

- Panel data analysis (2000–2017) to track longitudinal trends
- Cross tabulation and correlation matrices linking dynastic presence with budgetary patterns
- Network mapping techniques to visualize political family ties and their institutional footprints
- Institutional assessment models to evaluate the role of meritocracy versus patronage in civil service systems, using bureaucratic typologies from Knox et al. (2023)
- Comparative scoring of informal governance prevalence based on composite indicators

Through this multi layered methodological framework, the study captures the complex interdependence between elite political control, fiscal policy mechanisms, and the reproduction of informal institutions. By illuminating these connections, the research offers insights into the structural constraints facing reformist agendas in Southeast Asian democracies.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Dynastic Networks in Southeast Asia

In the Philippines, an estimated 70% of congressional representatives originate from politically influential families, particularly in rural provinces where name recognition and patronage networks are decisive. In Indonesia, after 1998, decentralization coincided with the emergence of regional dynasties, especially across Java and regional centers. In Malaysia and Thailand, dynastic influence persists under varying configurations, influenced by party structures and military interventions (Setyaningrum & Saragih, 2019).

In Malaysia and Thailand, while dynasties are less dominant, they persist under different configurations. Malaysia's ruling coalitions have historically accommodated dynastic actors, though with greater emphasis on party affiliation. Thailand's dynastic patterns are more volatile, shaped by military interventions and shifting alliances, but familial political inheritance remains evident in local elections and provincial governance (Syauket & Wijanarko, 2021). Across the region, political dynasties constrain electoral competition, as non-dynastic challengers often lack the material resources and political networks needed to compete effectively.

The influence of dynasties on legislative and executive performance is profound. Research shows that regions governed by dynastic leaders tend to experience lower public investment, inefficiencies in service delivery, and stagnation in policy innovation. This occurs because appointments are often made based on familial or personal loyalty rather than administrative competence (Rey, 2023). Additionally, the consolidation of power within family networks can hinder public accountability, suppress dissent, and discourage institutional reform. Empirical findings from the Philippines and Indonesia indicate that legislative districts with entrenched dynasties score lower on governance effectiveness metrics, with underperformance in sectors such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure development (Garces et al., 2021).

Intergenerational political succession is maintained through a combination of sociocultural, economic, and institutional factors. Societal norms in many Southeast Asian societies legitimize familial succession as a sign of continuity and trust, while dynastic families possess the financial capital to fund campaigns, secure media access, and maintain political influence. Social networks serve as informal support systems, reinforcing the dominance of elite families (Novilia et al., 2024). Legal and institutional frameworks such as the absence of term limits and weak campaign finance regulation enable dynastic proliferation. Regionally, patterns of entrenchment are particularly pronounced in the Philippines' Mindanao and Northern Luzon, and Indonesia's Java, where dynastic control over budgetary allocations and bureaucratic appointments reinforces their dominance (Rossieta et al., 2017).

Fiscal Policy and the Informal Economy

Across Southeast Asia, fiscal deficits are recurrent and correlate with informal sector expansion. In Indonesia, budgetary constraints coincide with growth in informal labor markets, especially in urban peripheries. In the Philippines, underfunded public services are associated with high rates of agricultural and microenterprise informality. In Vietnam, liberalization contributed to informal sector growth, while municipal reforms such as simplified tax registration and mobile banking have increased participation in formal markets (Fiva & Smith, 2018).

Elasticity studies underscore a strong inverse relationship between public spending and informality when governments reduce expenditures, informal labor markets tend to grow to absorb economic dislocation. Conversely, increases in public investment have been associated with reductions in informal employment as states are able to create more stable jobs in health, education, and infrastructure (Teehankee et al., 2023). This dynamic is particularly pronounced in countries like Indonesia, where budgetary constraints have coincided with significant informal sector expansion, especially in urban peripheries. The Philippines follows a similar trend, where underfunded public services and fiscal austerity drive informal work, especially in the agricultural and microenterprise sectors (Dressel & Bunte, 2014).

Vietnam presents a hybrid case. As the state transitioned from a centrally planned economy to a more market oriented model, it simultaneously retracted from several social sectors. This liberalization resulted in robust informal sector growth, reflecting reduced state involvement and expanding entrepreneurial activity. At the same time, Vietnam has made progress through policy reforms designed to integrate informal actors into the formal economy. Initiatives such as simplified tax registration, digitized banking access, and subsidized skill development programs have demonstrated effectiveness, particularly when implemented at the municipal level (Bazlan & Yazid, 2024).

Among successful fiscal reforms, those targeting micro and small enterprises have proven particularly impactful. In Malaysia, state supported credit systems and tax incentives have encouraged business registration and compliance with formal economic regulations. Reforms in Vietnam, including mobile banking outreach and flexible licensing frameworks, have also facilitated transition from informal to formal operations (Prianto, 2016). Moreover, education based programs aimed at informal workers have increased awareness and willingness to participate in the formal economy, especially when combined with infrastructure upgrades and social protection mechanisms (Yap, 2018).

Bureaucratic Patronage Patterns

Patterns of bureaucratic recruitment in Southeast Asia reveal stark contrasts between systems governed by meritocratic principles and those dominated by political patronage. Singapore and Japan represent ideal types of professional civil services, where recruitment processes are standardized, transparent, and detached from political interference. These countries consistently rank high in global governance and public trust indices due to their efficient and rule bound bureaucracies (Peou, 2014).

Conversely, Indonesia and the Philippines continue to grapple with bureaucratic politicization. In these contexts, civil service positions are often distributed based on loyalty to political patrons or affiliation with ruling families. Patron client relationships are commonly observed in hiring and promotion decisions, which undermines bureaucratic professionalism and creates vulnerabilities to corruption (Barabashev & Zaytseva, 2020). The lack of independent recruitment bodies and unclear criteria for appointment contribute to perceptions of bias and inefficiency (Zankina, 2020).

Comparative metrics indicate slower policy implementation and administrative delays in bureaucracies with higher patronage intensity. Governance datasets also record lower citizen satisfaction scores in these contexts. Conversely, Vietnam and Malaysia report measurable improvements following reforms emphasizing merit and accountability (Vasilev, 2015; Yunusa & Hulme, 2019).

To evaluate patronage intensity, several comparative metrics have been employed. These include the percentage of politically appointed officials in key agencies, the frequency of leadership turnover linked to electoral cycles, and transparency levels in civil service recruitment. Complementary indicators, such as corruption perception indices, time efficiency in public service delivery, and citizen feedback mechanisms, offer nuanced perspectives on bureaucratic integrity (Anas, 2024). Together, these metrics provide a framework for assessing the reform progress of states attempting to transition from patronage heavy systems to professionalized bureaucracies.

Institutional Conditions and Informality

Findings confirm that institutional weaknesses and limited bureaucratic professionalism sustain informalism in Southeast Asia. This aligns with theories of patron-client politics, which argue that weak institutional enforcement creates incentives for informal exchanges (Cyan & Pasha, 2017 ; Zulkarnain & Prasojo, 2020). Vietnam's reforms illustrate how transparency and meritocracy can partially disrupt these dynamics.

Case evidence from Indonesia and the Philippines reinforces this argument. In both countries, decentralized governance has unintentionally enabled the proliferation of localized informal networks, often controlled by entrenched political families. These networks rely heavily on personal relationships and reciprocity, bypassing formal rules. By contrast, Vietnam offers a partial counterexample. There, civil service reforms characterized by standardized recruitment procedures, performance evaluation, and bureaucratic training have mitigated the influence of informalism within public administration. Research by Boateng & Cox (2016) and Cohen (2016) supports the assertion that the institutionalization of transparency and meritocracy can reduce reliance on informal governance, particularly when accompanied by legal accountability mechanisms and citizen oversight initiatives.

Elite Continuity and Democratic Stagnation

Another major factor perpetuating informalism is the continued dominance of elite political families and networks. Elite continuity obstructs democratic deepening by limiting the emergence

of new actors, suppressing political pluralism, and narrowing the ideological space. The empirical findings from the Philippines and Indonesia highlight how political dynasties maintain intergenerational control over executive and legislative institutions, often through carefully orchestrated electoral strategies and control over campaign finance.

Suhendar & Fathurrahman (2023) explain that elite reproduction in politics inhibits democratic renewal by discouraging competition and promoting status quo governance. These elites often capture party structures, manipulate electoral laws, and engage in practices that deter meaningful citizen participation. As Gibbs (2020) suggest, elite dominance has a corrosive effect on political accountability, as it fosters environments where policies are designed to protect entrenched interests rather than respond to public needs. Moreover, the media and bureaucratic institutions often become extensions of dynastic influence, further consolidating power and impeding reform.

Chanchani (2022) observes that elite continuity often translates into a policy agenda that is insulated from grassroots input and resistant to innovation. This stagnation discourages investment in public goods and reinforces the dependence of marginalized communities on personalized political favors. Over time, this contributes to a democratic deficit, wherein formal electoral procedures persist but the substance of democracy accountability, responsiveness, inclusion is significantly weakened.

Fiscal Populism and Policy Fragility

Fiscal populism emerges as a central challenge to meaningful reform in patronage driven systems. Defined by short term, voter oriented spending strategies, fiscal populism undermines the long term sustainability of public finances and erodes institutional discipline. In Southeast Asia, many populist regimes rely on expansive welfare programs, cash transfers, and subsidized projects to cultivate political loyalty particularly during election cycles (Wynen et al., 2020).

Marcelin & Cela (2019) argue that these strategies are not only fiscally irresponsible but also structurally damaging. They divert essential resources from reform critical sectors like education, health, and civil service modernization and allocate them toward clientelist programs that offer limited developmental returns. The Philippine and Indonesian experiences illustrate how populist fiscal agendas exacerbate public deficits while empowering informal actors to act as intermediaries in resource distribution, further embedding informalism.

Comparative evidence underscores that fiscal populism exacerbates informality in Indonesia and the Philippines, while Vietnam shows that fiscal discipline, combined with oversight, can mitigate such tendencies. This demonstrates that fiscal policy design critically shapes the balance between formal and informal governance.

Reforms and the Prospects for Accountability

Despite these entrenched challenges, reform pathways exist. Anti dynasty legislation and civil service reform represent two of the most promising avenues for addressing informalism and

enhancing political accountability. Although politically difficult to implement, anti-dynasty laws can disrupt elite monopolies by imposing term limits, candidacy restrictions, or electoral quotas that promote diversification of political representation. Dommett & Skelcher (2014) argue that these laws can democratize access to political power and restore competitive equilibrium in electoral systems.

Diamond (2017) supports the view that institutional barriers to elite succession empower non dynastic candidates and encourage political parties to select leaders based on merit and policy orientation. However, such reforms are often resisted by incumbent elites, necessitating broad based coalitions of civil society actors, media, and international partners to sustain advocacy. Moreover, anti-dynasty reforms must be accompanied by electoral transparency measures, campaign finance regulation, and voter education programs to be truly effective.

Simultaneously, civil service reforms that prioritize professionalism, independence, and performance accountability can break the systemic link between political patronage and bureaucratic inefficiency. Asquer & Alzahrani (2019) emphasize that reforms should include independent recruitment bodies, results based performance evaluations, and career development programs. These elements not only improve service delivery but also restore public trust in government institutions.

Khan (2023) further notes that lasting reform depends on institutional resilience such as the capacity of courts, parliaments, and audit agencies to monitor and enforce standards. When civil servants operate in an environment free from political coercion and grounded in ethical codes, the appeal of informal arrangements diminishes. Ultimately, the future of political accountability in Southeast Asia rests on the dismantling of elite controlled informal systems and the reinforcement of transparent, rule based governance.

Limitations of this study include reliance on secondary data for some fiscal indicators and restricted generalizability beyond the three country cases. Future research should incorporate primary fieldwork, longitudinal citizen surveys, and comparative studies with non-Southeast Asian democracies to test external validity.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that informal political institutions remain deeply embedded in Southeast Asian governance, sustained by weak bureaucratic capacity, dynastic continuity, and fiscal populism. Comparative evidence from the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam shows how decentralized structures and elite networks perpetuate informalism, while targeted reforms in Vietnam highlight the potential of merit-based bureaucracy and fiscal discipline to reduce reliance on clientelist practices. These findings confirm that informalism is not a residual feature of underdevelopment but a deliberate strategy of elite domination within formal democratic frameworks.

The implications are twofold. For policymakers, reforms such as anti-dynasty legislation, professional civil service recruitment, and transparent fiscal oversight offer potential entry points

to weaken entrenched informal systems. For scholars, the study highlights the importance of integrating political economy and institutional theories to explain why informalism persists despite democratization. Future research should extend the comparative scope beyond Southeast Asia and incorporate primary field data to better capture the micro-level dynamics of clientelism and reform.

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