

Book review: Southeast Asia in pre- and post-COVID-19: economy, society, mobility and religion

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The COVID-19 pandemic represents a rupture in the global order – one that has deeply unsettled the political, economic and socio-cultural terrains of every region. *Southeast Asia in Pre- and Post-COVID-19*, edited by AKM Ahsan Ullah, Shirley Chin Wei Lee and Noor Hasharina Hassan, is a timely and analytically rich intervention into understanding the pandemic's multi-sectoral impacts in a region already grappling with globalization, rapid urbanization, religious plurality and migration complexities. In this 162-page volume, the editors offer a compelling composite portrait of six countries – Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Myanmar – through four interlinked domains: economy, society, mobility and religion. The book is a crucial contribution not only for scholars of Southeast Asia but also for those interested in comparative development, migration studies, public health governance and religious adaptation in times of crisis.

The principal argument of the book is that COVID-19 did not simply disrupt existing systems in Southeast Asia, but rather magnified latent inequalities and catalyzed a reconfiguration of political, economic and social relations. What distinguishes this book is its cross-sectoral lens – moving beyond health metrics to situate the pandemic within broader historical trajectories and institutional structures of the region. The book draws implicitly on theories of resilience, adaptation and crisis governance but does not tether itself to one overarching theoretical framework. Instead, it uses an interdisciplinary approach, drawing insights from sociology, religious studies, public policy and migration governance. The absence of a singular, defined theoretical framework may appear as a shortfall to some, but this flexibility allows for richer empirical specificity across chapters.

Contribution to scholarship

The chapters are empirically grounded, drawing from secondary sources, policy analysis and regional data to show how various Southeast Asian states have coped with the fallout of the pandemic. For instance, Chapter 2 demonstrates how economies that were once praised for their robust export sectors and growing middle classes (e.g. Malaysia and Vietnam) saw acute contractions, with millions slipping into poverty. Chapter 3 shifts attention to social structures,



especially community resilience and the unequal burden borne by marginalized populations. In Chapter 4, the discussion of migration foregrounds the profound reorientation in regional mobility patterns – where closed borders, internal displacement and policy restrictions reshaped long-standing transnational labor flows. Chapter 5 delves into religious adaptation, illustrating how traditional rituals and communal worship had to be reimaged through digital spaces and “divine immunisation” strategies, as in Brunei.

This multidimensional analysis represents a substantive and timely contribution to the fields of migration studies and regional development scholarship. By integrating the themes of economy, society, mobility and religion, the author offers a holistic framework for understanding how a global health crisis such as COVID-19 can have deeply uneven, yet interconnected, impacts across multiple sectors. The book demonstrates that crises do not merely disrupt existing systems but also catalyze structural transformations – inducing new forms of mobility and immobility that reshape not only labor markets but also household coping strategies, livelihood patterns and the regulatory logic of state migration regimes. In particular, the analysis of how border closures, job losses and informal migration surged during the pandemic reveals the fragility and resilience of regional migration systems in Southeast Asia.

Moreover, the section on religion adds a critical, though often neglected, dimension to the pandemic’s impact. It explores how religious institutions were not only sites of restriction but also became key nodes of moral guidance, emotional support and social solidarity. Faith communities had to rapidly adapt rituals and practices to meet public health directives – moving online, suspending gatherings or reframing traditional beliefs within a biomedical discourse. In this way, the book situates religion as an active agent in shaping both compliance with and resistance to state-enforced pandemic measures. By doing so, it expands conventional frameworks of pandemic response beyond the secular-state axis and invites deeper reflection on the role of belief systems in sustaining collective resilience during times of existential uncertainty. This integrative approach reinforces the importance of attending to socio-cultural specificities in any meaningful account of crisis response and recovery.

Significance

This book is especially valuable for the Development in Practice readership. It provides actionable insights for policymakers and practitioners dealing with the aftermath of COVID-19 across domains of mobility, healthcare, digital education and religious governance. The comparative lens makes it useful for understanding varied responses, allowing readers to discern best practices and policy pitfalls in pandemic preparedness and recovery. It is equally important for migration scholars, as it underscores the shifting terrain of mobility within and beyond borders – aligning with the emerging field of immobility studies.

Despite its many strengths, the book has some notable limitations. First, it could benefit from a more explicit theoretical grounding, particularly in crisis governance or disaster capitalism frameworks, which would have allowed for stronger analytical coherence across chapters. Second, while the empirical breadth is commendable, the book tends to rely heavily on descriptive synthesis rather than sustained qualitative analysis or primary fieldwork, which would have deepened the arguments. Third, it could have better addressed the role of regional institutions such as ASEAN in managing collective response or recovery – a significant omission given the book’s regional scope.

Moreover, while the book engages with relevant literature in its thematic chapters, some key contributions in the fields of crisis migration (Betts, 2013), resilience governance (Tierney, 2014) or religion in public health crises (Dein and Loewenthal, 2020) appear to be missing or underexplored. A more robust literature engagement would have further elevated its scholarly contribution.

Based on the structure and tone of the book, it appears that the author was mindful of ensuring coherence across chapters and sharpening comparative insights – suggesting responsiveness to prior feedback, particularly from editors or peer reviewers. *Southeast Asia in Pre- and Post-COVID-19* is a much-needed scholarly intervention at a time when the world is still grappling with the aftershocks of the pandemic. The volume's empirical range, policy relevance and thematic coherence make it a valuable addition to the literature. It not only documents a historic rupture but offers a pathway to understanding how crises reshape regions. As such, the book should find a wide audience among scholars, practitioners and policymakers seeking to make sense of the transformative moment COVID-19 has presented to Southeast Asia and the wider Global South.

Southeast Asia in Pre- and Post-COVID-19 is a valuable and ambitious book that succeeds in documenting the regional ruptures and continuities triggered by the global pandemic. Its rich empirical detail and broad thematic range make it a critical reference for researchers, students and policymakers alike. It is a book not just about disruption, but about resilience, creativity and regional specificity in the face of a global crisis. As such, it will likely become a foundational text in post-COVID Southeast Asian studies and migration research.

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