

Review Essay

Interrogating Participation: Motivations, Interests, and Control

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Participation without Democracy: Containing Conflict in Southeast Asia, by Garry Rodan. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018. Pp. 300. ISBN 9781501720109.

Introduction

“Participation” has become a buzzword both in the field of development work and good governance. In policy, program, and project implementation, participation has also been generally accepted as a key concept to people empowerment, transformational societal changes, and sustainable initiatives toward development.

In the book, *Participation without Democracy*, Garry Rodan provides a new perspective in looking at participation and introduces Modes of Participation (MoP) as a framework of interrogation. Rodan locates this framework in the growing and ever-expanding milieu of market capitalism, and how political regimes conform or adjust to the changes that this system brings. The framework also takes root in social conflict theories which directly link political and social dynamics to forms of societal (capitalist) development, because, he says, “institutions are... inseparable from social conflict and related struggles over state power shaping access to, and control over, resources” (p. 21).

The Context

According to Rodan, the development of market capitalism leads to the perpetuation and deepening of inequalities that disrupts social patterns, such as structures and interests, and generates new social conflicts while exacerbating old ones (p. 1). This, he further posits, results to political changes both for the ruling elites and those in the political margins. The struggle for power moves beyond existing institutional paradigms, thus new models of participation,

representation, and democracy emerge. These models are further developed and pursued by different actors for different objectives. Below is a derived illustration of Rodan’s analytical framework on the development of new models and structures of struggle vis-à-vis sociopolitical and economic dynamics in societies.

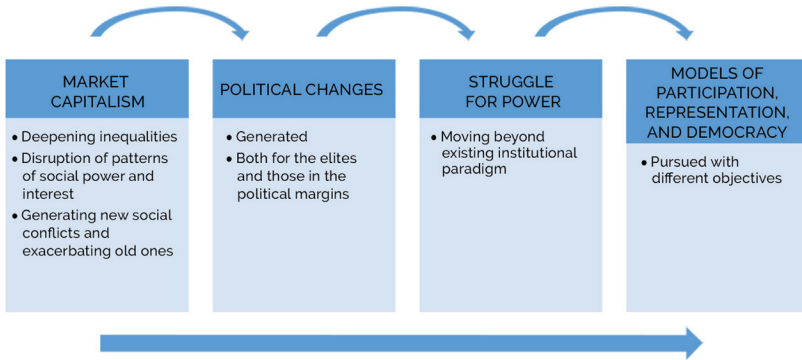


Figure 1. Illustration of Rodan’s Analytical Framework

While those at the political margins—civil society organizations (CSOs), nongovernment organizations (NGOs), and people’s organizations (POs), among others—may see political participation as a “vehicle to dismantle” the existing political power, the elites view participation as a “political instrument(s) that could enforce or consolidate power and wealth by domesticating the opposition” (p. 1). According to Rodan, for the elites, provision for an expanded political representation has proven to be an effective means to constrain political contestation, depoliticize institutionalized conflicts, and intensify fragmentation among the (opposition) elites, hence averting reformist coalitions and increasing their control over power and wealth.

With this book, the author intends to contribute to the “analysis of a general phenomenon where elites and popular forces alike are searching for new institutional solutions to new political problems” (p. 4). It sheds light and provides insights on the “forms of political participation and associated representations [that] are emerging, why, and what does this mean for regime directions... who promotes, supports, and opposes the initiatives [and/or] reforms to political representation and why... who gets [to participate] what, when and how; and on whether [through political participation] or how conflicts are

addressed, contained or compounded” in the process (pp. 5–6). Rodan posits that “at stake everywhere in struggles... of political participation and representation is not the democratic integrity or functionality [of the mechanism, but] which interests these institutions serve” (p. 5). Understanding the “new forms and ideologies of representation” (p. 5) political participation sees through the boundaries set by political regimes for political contestations as well as the permissible parameters for intraelite conflicts.

Understanding the MoP Framework

Rodan identifies distinguishable modes of participation in terms of sites of participation and levels of inclusion. Sites of participation would refer to whether the opportunity to participate is state sponsored and controlled or is autonomous from the state. Levels of inclusion, on the other hand, distinguishes between individual and collective participation.

State sponsored and controlled venues of participation may come in the form of administrative incorporation at the individual level, such as public feedback mechanisms, or by way of collective representation and participation in parliamentary or other state institutions.

These modes of participation are influenced by four ideologies of representation identified by the author, namely: (1) the particularist ideology, which provides space for a specific sector or issue while further marginalizing others; (2) populism, a direct representation of the people by the popular leader bypassing intermediary organizations; (3) consultative, that may come in the form of individual feedback mechanisms or select and issue-based CSO consultations; and (4) democratic representation as practiced by social movements and other independent formations.

On the whole, the author argues that MoPs are shaped by the following factors (p. 6):

1. Social conflicts over power and the interest coalitions that form around them;
2. Institutional manifestation of the struggles and the attempts at containing or expanding the scope for legitimate political conflict; and the
3. Mediating influence of ideology shaping the conduct and outcomes of the struggles.

The Case Studies

The book highlights three case studies from the experiences of Southeast Asian countries: Singapore, Philippines, and Malaysia. The goings-on in other parts of the world, on the other hand, served as a backdrop to the author's discussion that include the political and social changes linked to capitalist development used in populist politics such as that of Trump and Brexit; the financial crisis of 2007 to 2008 and the emergence of right-wing, anti-immigration populist parties in Europe; the left-wing redistributive populist movements in Latin America and the anti-globalization Occupy Wall Street movement in the US; and the "hollowing out or diminishing" democracy in Western Europe, among others. The contextual analysis provided grounds for the MoP framework put forward by the author.

The three case studies were chosen because innovative forms of political participation and representation can be drawn from their experiences and can clearly illustrate how these are generated to serve both the consolidation of power for the elite and the opportunity to break open doors of privilege for those at the political margins.

Singapore

The Singapore case study takes off from the historical account of the low-turnout elections for the ruling party, People's Action Party (PAP), consequent to intensified social media attacks on the elitist and meritocratic ideology of the politico-bureaucrats under the system of state capitalism and authoritarian rule. Alarmed by this emerging trend, the PAP had to invent various instruments that would project consultative processes in governance to public consciousness. This gave birth to the Nominated Members of the Parliament (NMP), the Our Singapore Conversation (OSC), and the Reaching Everyone for Active Citizenry @ Home (REACH) as public feedback mechanisms provided at the collective (NMP) and individual (OSC and REACH) levels. These, according to the author however, are mechanisms in which the PAP and state bureaucracy have tight control over. Specifically, REACH and OSC are deemed to have fostered "a compartmentalization of public policy issues" (p. 51) and worked toward the consolidation and reinforcement of the disorganized and politically fragmented nature of the nation's civil society (p. 70). The NMP, on the other hand, was an instrument to weaken partisan opposition by fragmentation, as it "obviate[s] the

formation of alliances among independent organizations and/or with opposition parties” (p. 91).

Philippines

The Philippine case study mainly focused on the Party List System (PLS) and the Bottom-Up Budgeting (BUB) program, which are both institutionalized mechanisms of political participation and representation at the collective level.

The PLS allows for the representation of marginalized groups in society for up to 20 percent of the members of the House of Representatives. This accomplishes, for the ruling elite, a projection and semblance of democratic representation while, at the same time, maintaining control of decision-making powers. As this mechanism upholds a particularist ideology of representation, it has likewise succeeded in further fragmenting the opposition groups wishing to effect structural and institutional reforms. And, while indeed the PLS has allowed for the participation of new social forces in the parliament, it has not translated to the alteration of existing power structures.

Similarly, the BUB is supposedly another reform-oriented government initiative that provided spaces for the participation of CSOs and local communities in the design and implementation of development interventions. However, like the PLS, it failed to usher a shift in power relations and political contestations. As per his own words, Rodan’s analysis of BUB states that: “At its essence, this was a struggle over whether BUB contained or facilitated substantial changes to the operations of state power” (p. 159). Both the PLS and the BUB intensified tensions and conflict among reformers competing for the already limited spaces of participation, thus helping further entrench the dominance of the ruling elite in decision-making processes.

Malaysia

Rodan describes Malaysia to be ruled by an electoral authoritarian regime, dominated by the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN; National Front), and headed by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). The Malaysian form of state capitalism nurtures the Malay capitalist elite by means of patronage via UMNO and the state bureaucracy. There were two accounts when the state sought to engage the civil society forces upon the advice of the National Economic Consultative Councils

(NECCs), and both dismally failed. Rodan attributes this to the ethnically based form of capitalist transformation and the “subsequent dynamics that militated against collective class-based organizations and social democracy gaining a foothold in the state, or outside it” (p. 210) that made it nearly impossible to pursue strategies of consultative participation. Further into this case study, Rodan likewise documented a substantial victory among the multiethnic, oppositional civil society movement Bersih (Gabungan Pilihanraya Bersih dan Adil; Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections), as it was able to demand for reforms and organize some of the biggest demonstrations in the history of the country. To Rodan however, this victory is not sustainable because of the weakness of the movement in terms of ideological unity and its tendency to focus on procedural reforms.

Below is a tabulated summary of the case studies propounded in the book.

Table 1. Summary of Case Studies

Dimension	Singapore	Philippines	Malaysia
Site of participation	State-sponsored	State-sponsored	State-sponsored
Level of inclusion	Collective: Nominated Members of the Parliament (NMP); Individual: Reaching Everyone for Active Citizenry @ Home (REACH) and Our Singapore Conversation (OSC)	Collective: Party List System (PLS) and Bottom-Up Budgeting (BUB)	Collective: Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections
Ideology of participation and representation	Consultative ideology: upholding interests of technocratic politico-bureaucrats	Particularist, pseudo-democratic: effecting fragmentation among reformist	Particularist, consultative, and elite patronage
Context of sociopolitical dynamics vis-à-vis market capitalism	State capitalism and authoritarian rule	Rule of the oligarchy and technocratic elites	Ethnicity-based capitalist transformation

Participation, Representation, and Political Contestations

Rodan himself says that the “MoP framework privileges the question of *why* political institutions emerge” (p. 221). As such, the book succeeds in interrogating “participation” as a tool embedded in mechanisms meant to further the elite’s control of power and resources. The case studies provide sufficient evidence to argue a systematized use of political participation and representation to perpetuate the ruling elites’ power and their deliberate effort to intensify the fragmentation of already weakening social movements in the context of neoliberal globalization. Further, the discussion on the ideologies of participation and representation contributes to the understanding of populist strategies that undermine democratic processes and how these become viable to people who desire direct representation in lieu of fragmented and ineffective intermediary organizations.

The book, however, mainly highlighted participation in the context of state sponsored and controlled mechanisms. Understanding participation as an integral element in political contestation cannot and should not be confined to the context of institutionalized, state sponsored initiatives. More than the state providing spaces for participation and representation, the strength of social movements, and the level of collective consciousness and historical grounding on struggles against repression are the compelling forces that propel a repressed public toward a sustained effort to challenge existing structures and tilt the balance of power relations. And while the concessions formed between the ruling elites and the moderate reformists may indeed prove fatal in the institutional battle for transformational and systemic changes, many grassroots organizations and people’s initiatives choose to strengthen political contestation and participation outside of this confluence.

A research on the dynamics between state and nonstate-initiated participation and representation, hence, may complement the effort of this book to the understanding of political power struggle within and outside of institutional structures.

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