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America's Aid Imperium and Human Rights in Southeast Asia

Has U.S. foreign aid led to advancements in rights or increased repression in Southeast Asia?

By **Salvador Santino F. Regilme Jr.**

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Does post-Cold War United States foreign aid strategy promote improved physical integrity rights outcomes in recipient Global South countries? If so, then how?

In my latest book, "[Aid Imperium: United States Foreign Policy and Human Rights in Post-Cold War Southeast Asia](#)," I challenge two inaccurate yet very popular absolutist beliefs concerning foreign aid. The first claim pertains to the Western-centric myth, which depicts foreign aid from the Global North as necessarily beneficial to recipient countries. That view pinpoints the lethal consequences of foreign aid as the sole fault of supposedly poor, irresponsible, and corrupt states in the Global South. The second claim, in contrast, refers to the critical view, which assumes that any Western intervention – including foreign aid and human rights diplomacy initiatives – is nothing but evil, imperialistic, and detrimental to the emancipatory politics of peoples beyond the West.

Both these absolutist narratives are fundamentally wrong. Rather, I highlight how recipient states weaponize aid in ways that consolidate their regime, while partially converging some of their interests with donor states. This interest convergence could either lead to democracy- and human rights-reinforcing outcomes, as shown in the post-Cold War 1990s, or to intensified state violence and physical integrity rights abuses, as exemplified by the post-9/11 U.S.-led global war on terror. As such, I emphasize the active political agency of Global South states and actors as they negotiate and chart their political trajectories with the United States as the core state of the global development aid sector.

In “Aid Imperium,” I offer a more complex but accurate assessment of foreign aid’s impact on human rights. I investigate the variation in human rights outcomes in Southeast Asia vis-à-vis the varying strategic purposes and amounts of U.S. aid over time, particularly from the early 1990s to 2016. Notably, the donor and recipient governments’ converging interests, together with the recipient government’s domestic legitimacy, primarily shape the purposes of foreign aid programs and domestic policies.

I refute the belief that recipient states usually do not have the power to shape the strategic purposes and the implementation patterns of foreign aid programs. Rather, the evidence from post-Cold War U.S. foreign aid in Southeast Asia shows that aid recipient governments instrumentalize foreign aid in ways that bolster their domestic political legitimacy. Thus, foreign assistance per se is neither intrinsically good nor bad for human rights; rather, relevant stakeholders’ shared ideas and converging policy preferences shape the material conditions and patterns of state practices that make foreign aid a potent tool for social transformation.

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Aid recipient governments strategically frame their discourses and interests in ways that, at least partially or seemingly, adapt to the preferences of their own domestic public and the donor government. For example, the emergence of the dominant counterterrorism agenda was demonstrated by the strategic convergence of the policy preferences of the Bush administration, the Thai and Philippine governments, and the domestic public. At the international level, the administrations of Philippine President Gloria Arroyo

(2001-2010) and Thailand's Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (2001-2006) made the case that the terror threat to the United States was strongly linked to the armed Islamic insurgencies in Mindanao in the Philippines and southern Thailand, respectively, which in turn motivated the Bush-led White House to provide counterterror assistance. At the domestic level, the overwhelming public insecurity due to the 9/11 terror attacks in the United States contributed to the perceived need for intensified state violence.

In contrast, the confluence of a wide range of non-militaristic and pro-human-rights policy preferences of the United States and Southeast Asian governments in the 1990s generated an improvement in the human rights situation in Thailand and the Philippines. The pre-9/11 Thai and Philippine governments, which enjoyed strong domestic legitimacy, strategically localized discourses that sought both to respond to the emerging political demands of their domestic public and to complement the U.S. government's strategic purposes. In the 1990s, the Clinton administration's democracy-oriented foreign aid and diplomacy complemented the Thai and Philippine governments' domestic policies that aimed to reinforce economic development and human rights.

How does the recipient government's domestic legitimacy impact the potential effects of foreign aid, particularly in its possible impact on the magnitude and impact of state repression? Domestic political conditions shape the recipient government's decision on whether foreign aid and internal state resources would be deployed to intensify state repression against armed and unarmed political opposition. Ruling governments with strong political support

from within and beyond the state machinery are likely to tolerate unarmed political opposition, critical journalists, and civil society groups. The strong political legitimacy of the Ramos-led government (1992-1998) in the Philippines and the Chai-led government in Thailand in the 1990s eliminated the need for violently repressing peaceful political opposition.

In contrast, the Arroyo administration in the Philippines and the Thaksin administration in Thailand persistently faced severe challenges to their domestic hold to power, right from the very start of their leadership tenure, and even before the 9/11 attacks that precipitated the U.S.-led global war on terror. This political legitimacy dilemma motivated the Arroyo and Thaksin administrations to expand the range of targets for domestic state repression and to brand legal political opposition members and civil society activists as enemies of the state.

In the midst of a transnational security crisis, donor governments should only provide militaristic aid to recipient governments that possess strong support from within and beyond the state apparatus and consistently commit to their citizens' physical integrity rights. In that way, foreign aid is likely to be used only for the repression of armed rebels and not civilians and unarmed political dissidents. The culture of impunity sends a wrong message to prospective state violators, who assume that they can easily evade legal penalties, thereby engendering more human rights abuses. To reduce substantially the risk that state agents erroneously target civilians as armed rebels, foreign aid should support the long-term institutional capacities and professionalization of the judicial system, the armed forces, and police agencies.

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