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# perspectives

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POLITICAL ANALYSES AND COMMENTARY

## ASIA

### Two Sides of the Medals – Sports and Politics in Asia



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# Editorial

This should have been a summer like no other for Tokyo. After 56 years, the Games of the XXXII Olympiad and the Paralympic Games should have returned to the city to bolster former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's grand project to revitalize Japan. Like in 1964 – when Tokyo, as the first Asian city to host the Olympics, sought to demonstrate to the world that it had emerged from the post-war period and transformed into a strong, liberal democracy – the 2020 Tokyo Olympics were meant to show the nation and the world that 'Japan is back' and that the 2011 Fukushima triple catastrophe was a thing of the past.

But the corona pandemic struck the world. Although Mr. Abe stubbornly clung to his plans and pretended for weeks that everything would go on as 'normal,' the International Olympic Committee on 24 March announced the postponement of the Games until summer 2021. Now Tokyo has to wait another year to become the first Asian city to host the summer Olympics twice.

And it has set a new record, as the first Olympic host to be plagued by postponements twice.

In fact, large sporting events are often entangled with politics and hidden interests. In his 2009 book, 'Beyond the Final Score: The Politics of Sport in Asia', Victor Cha argues that sports can impact diplomacy, serve as a prism to project a country's vision, and facilitate change within a country. This seems especially plausible in Asia, where in the early 1970s small ping-pong balls helped to end the Cold War between China and the United States; in 1988 the Seoul Olympics were a catalyst for South Korea's surprising transformation into a

democracy; and in 2018 Pakistan's greatest cricketer, Imran Khan, became Prime Minister. Fittingly, former Indonesian President Sukarno – after setting up the Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEFU) in 1963 as a counter to the Olympics, and having his country banned from the Olympics the following year – declared: '[N]ow let's frankly say, sports have something to do with politics.'

This issue of Perspectives Asia examines such intersections of sports and politics. We look at how, through sports, identities are shaped, myths and heroes are born, and unconventional truths are buried. Brian Bridges gives a concise analysis of the political currents behind the various summer and winter Olympics held in China, Japan and South Korea. Koide Hiroaki, an activist in Japan's anti-nuclear movement and former nuclear engineer, points out the Japanese government's mismanagement of the Fukushima disaster and its aftermath, and questions the strategy of using the Tokyo Olympics to divert attention from the ongoing consequences of the nuclear meltdown.

Ashish Khandaliker highlights some fascinating statistics about the Olympics from a distinctly Asian perspective. Who would have known, for example, that the first Olympic gold medal won by an Asian was received by Tejbir Bura from Nepal at the first Winter Olympics in 1924 in Chamonix, France, where the 1922 British Mount Everest expedition was recognized for its (unsuccessful, and for seven Indian porters tragically fatal) attempt to conquer the world's highest peak?

Extreme sports expert Ding Yiyin gives an account of how skateboarding, BMX racing and other previously subculture sports

have found their way into China and are enriching the country's sporting horizons. Zainab Hussaini explains how skateboarding is helping to build trust among young children, often girls, from different ends of the social divide in Afghanistan, many of whom bear the scars of war-time trauma.

Joanna Son explores how sports can help to build a shared identity across nationalities. The ASEAN nations' Southeast Asian Games, which officially include indigenous martial arts beloved throughout the region, such as muay, sepak takraw and pencak silat, have helped to transcend national boundaries and build a regional sense of community. One such sport, kabaddi, has spread from India to large parts of South Asia and beyond. Shripoorna Purohit describes how this unique sport has gone beyond its origins and captured the public imagination.

On the other hand, the SEA Games exhibit a complex amalgam of nationalism, patronage and corruption. Bonn Juego explains these linkages and sketches out a path towards the depoliticisation of sports for more positive purposes.

Photojournalist Pho Thar, recently released from Yangon's notorious Insein Prison after a 14-month sentence for making fun of the military, follows a cohort of disabled athletes from Myanmar's Paralympic Sports Federation. His photographs testify to the transformational power of sports.

While athletes and sports enthusiasts around the world sport fancy jerseys provided by global brands and sponsors of large sporting events, the workers who make them, mostly female, toil under atrocious conditions in the garment sectors of Cambodia and other Asian countries. Rachana Bunn raises her voice for them, calling for

more respect for human rights, and an end to exploitative working conditions in garment factories.

Gender fluid bodybuilder Law Siufung discusses the multiple hurdles LGBTI athletes in Asia have to deal with, and suggests ways to work upon the rules, norms and market forces towards gender diversity.

With the battle against the coronavirus far from over, sports may seem like a distant memory to many people. It remains uncertain whether the Olympics and Paralympics will take place in 2021 in Tokyo, or will be cancelled altogether. Nevertheless, when the games do resume, the rich, diverse and complicated interactions between sports and societies in Asia will continue. So will the struggles over exploitation and exclusion related to class, race and gender, which, as Bonn Juego puts it, are best overcome by collective political action.

With this issue, the production of Perspectives Asia has moved to our new regional office in Hong Kong. We look forward to working with the other Asian offices of Heinrich Böll Stiftung to provide political analysis from Asia twice a year. Please contact us should you have any suggestions, questions or comments.

**Clemens Kunze, Kevin Li, and Lucia Siu**

The Editors

Heinrich Böll Stiftung Hong Kong Office

# Politics and Sports Capitalism in the Southeast Asian Games

Bonn Juego

The Southeast Asian Games has been negatively politicised since the 1950s. It has sported a complex interplay of colonialism, decolonisation, nationalism, geopolitics, patronage and capitalism. Repurposing it for the well-being of individual athletes and the regional sporting culture is long overdue. Yet, to depoliticise sports toward positive purpose necessitates collective political action.

## Introduction

The 30th Southeast Asian (SEA) Games in the Philippines from 30 November to 11 December 2019 was the biggest sporting event ever held in the region. Yet what should have been a showcase of athletic excellence became instead a reminder of the recurring political pestilence that has plagued this biennial competition since its 1959 inauguration. Controversies over the host country's alleged organisational incompetence, corruption, politicking, and human rights violations overshadowed stories of victory, individual triumphs and team records.<sup>1</sup> Again, politics won over athletics.

News and images featuring incomplete facilities and logistical mishaps abounded. Online bickering between loyalists and critics of President Rodrigo Duterte spilled over into public debate on the government's hosting performance. Elected politicians, state officials, and politically connected businessmen managed the Philippine SEA Games Organising Committee, which is facing investigations for misappropriation of the event's USD 150 million budget, notably its lavish expenditures for the cauldron and the grand opening and closing ceremonies. Then there were complaints from

activists about how the construction of a major venue, the 50-hectare sports complex within New Clark City, was used by the government and private investors to accelerate the forced displacement of some 500 indigenous Aeta families.

The politicisation of sports (i.e., the struggle for the allocation of power and resources between competing interest groups in the sporting community) is not exclusive to the SEA Games. This phenomenon is more pronounced in commercialised sports involving the exchange of big money sourced from states, corporations, and individual capitalists, like the Olympics, continental games, and many professional leagues. But its prevalence is not an excuse to normalise the commodification of the bodies and lives of athletes, or to continue tolerating corrupt practices of organisers from the public and private sectors.

Since its foundation, the norms and conduct of the SEA Games have been governed by political, security, economic and business considerations, rather than intercultural aspirations between neighbouring countries. After being held 30 times, the SEA Games is still in search of meaning and purpose.

## Colonial sports

Sport is both an individual and social endeavour. Individually, sport is the quest to realise the maximum potential of the human will, mind and body. Socially, sport entails complex relationships between players of a game, concerned institutions and other stakeholders within the body politic. The history of the SEA Games is very much



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a story of political power relations, rather than of memorable athletic achievements.

Sports politics, or the political capture of sports, in Southeast Asia has several dimensions. From a historical perspective, the evolution of sports in the region has displayed distinctive features of colonialism, decolonisation, geopolitics, nationalism, patronage and capitalism.

First, “Western” sports were introduced by European and American colonisers in Southeast Asia from the 16th century until the 1940s. Through mediation by local elites, imperial sports became tools to instil discipline and loyalty in the colonial subjects, aside from their entertainment value for the ruler and the ruled.<sup>2</sup> In the early 20th century, the US agenda in Asia, via its Philippine colony, incorporated amateur sports into the “modernisation” doctrine, which problematised the “backwardness” of Asian societies, politics, economies and cultures. From 1911 to 1913, the American branch of the Young Men’s Christian Association created the Far Eastern Championship Games and the Far Eastern Athletic Association, which reorganised into the Asiad and the Asian Games Federation after World War II. Colonialism constituted a “mass-based sportive citizenship training” with a certain “bio-political” aim to resolve “civilizational deficits of East Asian concepts of masculinity” through sports “as a healthy, rational, and scientific form of recreation” that could stop Asian vices of “promiscuity, gambling, cock-fighting, and boozing.”<sup>3</sup> Colonial sports promoted international games and physical education as a significant part of the “Western civilizing mission” to transition Asia into modernity, democracy, capitalism and “muscular Christianity.”<sup>4</sup>

## Geo-politics

From the 1940s through the 1960s, newly independent Asian countries adopted sport programmes as part of their respective national identity-formation and nation-building processes. Discourse on sports “decolonisation” included concepts such as Pan-Asianism, Asiatisation, and anti-colonialism in the organisation of regional games. Among Asia’s political elites, these ideas were interpreted differently as either new patterns of “dependent relationships” between former colonies and colonisers, or as articulations of a “variety of nationalisms,” based upon ethnicity, state or anti-

imperialism.

Secondly, the politicised nature of the SEA Games started with its precursor, the Southeast Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games, established under the leadership of the Olympic Council of Thailand in 1958 during the Third Asiad in Tokyo. Though sports have served as a symbol of amity in the regionalism of contemporary Southeast Asia, it was an interesting mixture of national interests and friend/enemy distinctions in geopolitics that initially defined SEAP’s exclusivist membership. The decision of Thailand—as the pioneering host nation and overall administrator of the 1959 SEAP Games—to make the inaugural spectacle exclusive to its non-communist neighbours (i.e. Burma, Laos, Malaya, Singapore, and South Vietnam) and reject the participation of the more competitive sporting countries (i.e. Indonesia and the Philippines) “had the goal of containing [North] Vietnamese communism” and “undoubtedly favoured Thailand’s athletes” – thus reflecting a “mode of Thai-centric, anticommunist regionalism encompassing mainland Southeast Asia.”<sup>5</sup> Only in 2003 did all the peninsular and insular countries comprising Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) become participants in the SEA Games, namely: Brunei, Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

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Pursuit of national interest has been a persistent characteristic of ASEAN’s regional sporting culture. Instead of fierce competition between nations as in the Olympics, the distinct norms of tolerant reciprocity and cooperative exchange among participating states delineate the SEA Games. For example, the host country is given the privilege of selecting a list of events that play to its advantage and allow it to top the medal standings. This pragmatic approach is aimed at securing funds for the event, which are mostly appropriated from



the host government's national budget, to sustain the SEA Games.

## Patronage and Clientelism

Thirdly, the politics of patronage and clientelism is a permanent fixture in the history of sports in Southeast Asia. Business and political elites act as patrons to their clients among athletes, fans, consumers and voters. Their influential involvement in sports is present through various means: from owning teams and clubs, and having sponsorship deals, in commercial sports (e.g., in the old Philippine Basketball Association and the new Malaysian Football League), to organising and bankrolling local tournaments and matches in vote-rich grassroots communities, especially during an election season. It is also often the case in the region that national teams and athletes thrive on monetary contributions from wealthy private and corporate benefactors, not necessarily on government funding.

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Sport is woven into the fabric of society. It serves specific functions to different groups of people, though unequally in terms of class relations. For instance, some of the favourite spectator sports in Asia – like football, basketball, boxing and horseracing – signify the pursuit of personal ambition for athletes, a regular day job for staff, or simple leisure for ordinary fans. On the contrary, these games serve as pastimes, gambling opportunities, entrepreneurial ventures, tax credit strategies, or public relations occasions for sections of Asia's elite.

Sports are also a battleground of opposing tendencies in society. There have been historical moments when spectator sports and celebrity athletes have exhibited political resistance, notably the refusal of the legendary boxer Muhammad Ali to serve in the US military during the Vietnam War, the No Room For Racism campaign in European

football leagues, and the recent support to the Black Lives Matter movement in the National Basketball Association. However, in Southeast Asia, sports are less likely to provide a platform for opposition politics than for powerful social forces to exercise their patronage and clientelism.

## Sports Capitalism

Alongside nationalism and patronage, the logic of sports capitalism is shaping the sporting culture in Southeast Asia's emerging economies. Sports capitalism enables unequal social relations whereby sports generate profits for some while exploiting others through alienation, commodification and dispossession. The political economy of sports capitalism has multiple aspects and contradictory manifestations, which have critical implications for the future of the SEA Games and the evolving sports structure:

1. *Liberalist Individualism.* Sports capitalism exemplifies liberalist individualism – the ethos in which individuality, competitiveness and personal excellence against all institutionalised odds are celebrated. In the hegemonic US-style capitalism, in which social inequalities are peddled as a natural order, sports is promoted as a special sphere where even the poor, black descendants of slaves are qualified to compete in pursuit of greatness, despite lacking inherited property from rich parents, or the institutional advantages of white privilege, simply by having individual determination, skill and talent. The same individualistic path to success, like the rags-to-riches story of Filipino boxer Manny Pacquiao, is being popularised in the highly stratified and class-divided societies of Southeast Asia.

2. *Inequalities.* Under conditions of capitalism, there are stark inequalities in the allocation of value in sports. Though star players of spectator sports are paid astronomical salaries and talent fees, they may still be considered as workers for the owners of companies who profit from their work, and as labourers whose incomes are legitimately earned through their perceptible hard work and professionalism. In team sports, individual excellence is praised, while the game is presented as a process of teamwork. However, lower-tier workers who significantly contribute to the sports production process are often limited to subsistence or starvation wages.

3. *Alienation and Commodification.*

One of the contradictions of sport as a human and social activity is that, while it offers uplifting narratives about humanity, it also has painful stories of horrendous bodily abuse and attendant social pathologies. This includes the doping of athletes, a violent subculture of hooliganism between fans, and the sexual objectification and assault of promotional models. Discrimination based on gender, race, religion and other identities is also prevalent. Human strength, speed, creativity and elegance in the physical art and science of sports are commoditised to profit a few elites. Sports capitalism turns games into hyper-competition, play into corporate business, players into moving marketing ads, record performance into market value, the human body into a self-destructive machine, and athletes and workers into commodities.

4. *Negative Nationalism and Profitability.* In international games, the expression of nationalism may be healthy to the extent that supporting a national team will not engender extreme attitudes of jingoism, chauvinism, or mass hysteria oriented to winning over a perceived enemy at all cost. However, sports capitalism suggests that there are profitable opportunities in competing nationalistic loyalties. In this sense, sports nationalism and capitalism can have deleterious effects on the values of civility and sportsmanship.

5. *Financialisation.* Sports capitalism is clearly manifested in the way popular sports in the world today are sustained, connected and facilitated by digital technology in the global gambling industry. The opportunity to bet gives fans a financial stake in the outcome of a game. Oftentimes, betting in organised sports generates unfair behaviour and dishonest activities like game-fixing that undermine the integrity of sports. Moreover, sports betting and gambling are used as channels through which transnational crimes such as money laundering and other illicit financial transactions are carried out.

6. *Labour Exploitation.* Hosting international organised sports is mainly business, notwithstanding the host nation's agenda for cultural projection. The oft-repeated economic rationale for a host country is the opportunity to build infrastructure and amass foreign direct investment, but it has become evident that mega sporting events have also left behind white elephants and unsustainable sovereign indebtedness. On top of the extravagant financial cost to

societies, multinational games have often entailed poor labour conditions in the construction of sports venues and facilities. The occupational hazards of erecting innovative architectural projects, especially stadiums for the Olympics and FIFA World Cups, have resulted in the death and injury of workers.<sup>6</sup>

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This experience in the construction of a state-of-the-art sports complex and athletic stadium signifies how modern sporting activities entail social exclusion, and specifically, how these investments are deeply entangled with the interests of government officials, real estate developers, architecture firms, and private investors in appropriating the concept of urban sustainability.

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7. *Accumulation by Dispossession.* The accumulation of wealth through sports capitalism is usually accomplished by vested interests through coercion or co-optation to get the consent of the vulnerable yet rightful owners of the commons. This was coherently shown in 2018 when the USD 80 million Athletics Stadium of the New Clark City Sports Complex was being constructed as a central hub of the 30th SEA Games. It was reported that at least 300 families were initially evicted from their homes and soon after, during the Games itself, some 500 families from the Aeta tribe were served eviction notices by the government.<sup>7</sup> In effect, the brazen land-grab and displacement of the indigenous Aeta people, who have a collective history of exclusive and continuous possession of their ancestral lands, was actualised in the name of “inclusive, green and sustainable development” to decongest Metropolitan Manila by building a new “smart city.”<sup>8</sup> The indigenous people were also deprived of their traditional livelihoods and, to add insult to injury, some of them were co-opted to work on precarious and contractual terms doing menial jobs such as cleaning and security to maintain and protect this green urbanism project. Hence, this experience in the construction of a state-of-the-art sports complex and athletic stadium signifies how modern sporting activities entail social exclusion, and specifically, how these investments are deeply entangled with the interests of government officials, real estate developers, architecture firms, and private investors in appropriating the concept of urban sustainability.

## Depoliticising Sports

After sixty years, the SEA Games needs to face its existential crisis head-on by re-examining its nationalistic orientation and its current predisposition to the dehumanising essence of sports capitalism. On paper, the charter of the SEA Games Federation asserts a commitment to the life philosophy of “Olympism” based on the core values of excellence, friendship and respect. In reality, however, the systemic politicisation of the SEA Games is in contrast to the Olympic Movement’s principle of “political neutrality.” Likewise, the persistence of negative nationalism in Southeast Asia’s sports festival and the vicious encroachment of inhumane capitalism into the world sporting structure are in conflict with the desirable goal of the Olympics “to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity.”

Repurposing the SEA Games to make it a meaningful and relevant sporting association is long overdue. While the SEA Games has been politicised from the very beginning, its depoliticisation towards positive change would require an intense political act. In particular, it would necessitate political will from decision-makers and/or an organised political movement among athletes, sports fans, taxpayers and active citizens.

There is scope for redefining the mission of the SEA Games and the purpose of sports for the peoples of Southeast Asia. The multi-sports events of the SEA Games should embody a healthy mix of cooperation and competition, teamwork and individuality, internationalism and patriotism. ASEAN, with the willing participation of all its member states, can forge a unique and humanist sports identity in its regionalisation process, in which the SEA Games provides an opportune space and moment to realise the broader objectives of human flourishing, community solidarity, democratic governance, social justice, and ecological sustainability. After all, sport is a contested human and social activity – as such, it is an arena where political struggles against exploitative, exclusionary and destructive dynamics along class, racial, gender and ecological dimensions can be advanced. ■■■

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- <sup>2</sup> Charles Little. 2010. “South-East Asia.” In *Routledge Companion to Sports History*, edited by Steven W. Pope and John Nauright. London: Routledge, 587–598; Lou Antolihao. 2015. *Playing with the Big Boys: Basketball, American Imperialism, and Subaltern Discourse in the Philippines*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- <sup>3</sup> See the seminal research by Stefan Huebner. 2016. *Pan-Asian Sports and the Emergence of Modern Asia*. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press.
- <sup>4</sup> Huebner, pp. 261–277.
- <sup>5</sup> Simon Creak. 2017. “Eternal friends and erstwhile enemies: The regional sporting community of the Southeast Asian Games.” *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 5(1): 147–172.
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#### Cover illustration by Kaitlin Chan

This issue's front and back cover illustrations are by Kaitlin Chan. On front cover from left to right, the winners podium includes: Law Siufung, the genderqueer bodybuilder from Hong Kong; a Cambodian worker in the sports manufacturing industry; a Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant worker in a hazmat suit; an ASEAN athlete with a gold medal; and Zainab Hussaini, the Afghan marathon athlete and skateboarder. On the back cover is a stadium with robot fans (due to the Covid-19 pandemic) cheering on four athletes: two *kabaddi* wrestlers from India, a Paralympic Games athlete from Myanmar playing basketball, and a BMX extreme sports biker from China.

**Kaitlin Chan** is an illustrator from Hong Kong. You can find more of her work at [www.kaitlinchan.com](http://www.kaitlinchan.com).



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