



DECENTRALIZATION AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORMS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Abstract: This paper explores the relationship between decentralization and democratic governance through a comparative analysis of local government reforms in Southeast Asia. The study examines how decentralization initiatives have been implemented in countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos, considering historical, political, and institutional contexts. Drawing on empirical studies and policy analyses, it evaluates the effectiveness of decentralization in improving governance outcomes, including transparency, accountability, citizen participation, and public service delivery. The research highlights the diverse impacts of decentralization across different governance systems, noting both positive outcomes—such as enhanced local autonomy and increased civic engagement—and challenges including corruption, inadequate institutional capacity, and uneven resource distribution. Case studies reveal that while some reforms have empowered local governments and communities, others have reinforced central control or created new avenues for elite capture. Special attention is given to the localization of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and how decentralized governance structures contribute to—or hinder—achieving inclusive and sustainable development. The study concludes that for decentralization to foster democratic governance, reforms must be context-sensitive, supported by strong legal frameworks, and coupled with active civil society engagement. The findings offer policy recommendations aimed at strengthening decentralization processes in Southeast Asia and advancing equitable and participatory governance.

Keywords: decentralization, democratic governance, Southeast Asia, local government reform, public participation

1. Introduction

In recent years, the discourse surrounding decentralization and democratic governance has gained prominence, particularly within the context of Southeast Asia. This region presents a unique tapestry of governance systems that vary greatly in efficacy and inclusivity. As nations grapple with the dual challenge of promoting



economic growth while ensuring civic participation, local government reforms emerge as a pivotal focus. The governance and growth nexus in Southeast Asia illustrates the necessity of aligning local governance structures with broader economic outcomes, which includes addressing key issues such as revenue generation and access to services (Gonzalez et al.). Additionally, it is crucial to examine how political governance—encompassing the rule of law and participation—affects decentralization initiatives (Gonzalez et al.). Ultimately, understanding these dynamics is essential for evaluating the effectiveness of local government reforms and fostering sustainable democratic practices in the region.

Decentralization refers to the transfer of authority and responsibility from central to local governments, aiming to enhance democratic governance and promote citizen participation. This shift is significant because it enables local communities greater control over their destinies, enabling them to tailor services to meet specific needs and priorities. As highlighted in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), localizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) underscores the essential role of subnational governments in implementing national agendas effectively (N/A, 2022). However, the process must be carefully designed, as poor execution can lead to inefficiency and inequity. Achieving the benefits of fiscal decentralization demands a nuanced understanding of how public functions are reallocated among various governmental tiers. Policymakers must confront both technical and political challenges while adapting functional assignments to contextual realities to ensure meaningful decentralized governance (Ferrazzi et al., 2022).

The struggle for democratic governance in Southeast Asia reveals a complex interplay between political reform and systemic challenges, particularly in the context of decentralization efforts. Countries like Laos exemplify how economic ambitions often overshadow governance initiatives, as extensive agricultural expansion and infrastructure projects contribute to significant deforestation while undermining local community rights (Castella et al., 2013). This dual dynamic significantly impacts governance protocols, as the lack of clarity in carbon rights and weak institutional capacity hinder effective implementation of policies intended to manage natural resources. Additionally, in Indonesia, the decentralization process reflected a mixed bag of outcomes, where although local autonomy was meant to enhance accountability and reduce corruption, it inadvertently increased opportunities for corrupt practices within regional governments (Kirana et al., 2014). These cases illustrate that to achieve effective democratic governance, Southeast Asian nations must confront both the pitfalls of decentralization and the deeply entrenched issues of corruption and mismanagement.

The purpose of the comparative study of local government reforms in Southeast Asia is to analyze the intricate relationship between decentralization and

democratic governance, particularly how these reforms impact sustainable development goals at the subnational level. As nations adopt policies that align with the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, it is critical to understand how local governance structures are equipped to engage in this agenda effectively. While the localization of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasizes the role of subnational governments, there remains a gap in analyzing the fiscal, political, and legal arrangements necessary for successful implementation, a theme explored thoroughly in the research. Furthermore, examining specific case studies, such as that of Laos, reveals the challenges of implementing reforms amidst competing interests that prioritize economic growth over sustainable forest governance, as detailed in the findings (Castella et al., 2013). Collectively, this comparative analysis seeks to inform policymakers about best practices and foster equitable democratic governance in the region.

The examination of local government reforms in Southeast Asia underscores the complex relationship between decentralization and democratic governance. Variations in the implementation of decentralized systems have yielded disparate outcomes, with some regions experiencing enhanced citizen participation and accountability, while others face governance challenges, such as corruption and inefficiency. As noted in recent analyses of governance systems, the interplay between economic management and political oversight reveals significant disparities across the region. Specifically, the effectiveness of revenue generation and social spending initiatives can either empower local governance structures or expose them to exploitative practices (Gonzalez et al.). Furthermore, the state of the rule of law and judicial independence contributes significantly to the success of decentralization efforts in fostering political stability and citizen engagement (Gonzalez et al.). Ultimately, understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing policies that strengthen democratic governance through informed and context-sensitive decentralization strategies.

2. Historical Context of Decentralization in Southeast Asia

The historical context of decentralization in Southeast Asia reveals a complex interplay between economic ambitions and governance challenges. Nations in this region, particularly Laos, have attempted to decentralize governance structures as a means to enhance local participation and resource management. However, these efforts have often been undermined by persistent issues such as weak local capacities and unclear governance frameworks, leading to ineffective implementation of decentralized policies. For instance, while the Laotian government has shown commitment to environmental sustainability through initiatives like REDD+, the actual outcomes suffer from inadequate local involvement and coordination among stakeholders (Castella et al., 2013). Moreover, the broader governance landscape in

Southeast Asia highlights persistent inefficiencies and corruption, complicating the decentralization agenda. As countries strive for democratic governance, it becomes imperative to address these historical deficiencies in governance to ensure that decentralization can lead to genuine empowerment and enhanced local service delivery (Gonzalez et al.).

Colonial legacies and their influence on local governance

The enduring impact of colonial legacies remains a crucial factor in understanding local governance dynamics in Southeast Asia, especially in the context of decentralization reforms. Colonial administrations often established centralised bureaucratic structures that prioritized control over local autonomy, creating a framework that persists in many post-colonial states. This centralization has fostered neo-patrimonialism, where authority is maintained through personal networks rather than democratic institutions, thereby complicating local governance efforts (Björkhagen et al., 2016). In regions like North Maluku, the integration of traditional practices with modern governance initiatives reveals the challenges posed by these legacies. The resurgence of traditional adapted practices, influenced by colonial administrative frameworks, underscores a potential pathway for reconciliation and community engagement amidst governance reforms (Dekker et al., 2002). Therefore, recognizing these colonial influences is essential for implementing effective decentralization that genuinely empowers local governance structures.

Post-colonial state-building and centralization trends

The complexities of post-colonial state-building in Southeast Asia underscore a tension between centralization and decentralization, often driven by national crises and regional instability. For instance, Indonesia's rapid decentralization in response to severe conflicts highlights the challenges faced by newly devolved systems in maintaining political accountability and effective service delivery. In contrast, the Philippines illustrates a more structured approach to decentralization, emerging from a stable democratic regime, which has yielded relatively successful governance outcomes. However, both nations grapple with persistent regional discontent, suggesting that decentralized governance does not automatically mitigate regional separatism or enhance integration of marginalized groups into the political framework. This underscores the argument that the interplay between decentralization and state capacity is critical in addressing disparities, as seen in discussions of public health frameworks where effective governance hinges on local capabilities. This complexity is further highlighted in recent studies examining the political and institutional dynamics that affect service delivery and social outcomes (Hammarlund et al., 2015)(Halimatusa\ud7diyah et al., 2019).



Emergence of decentralization movements in the late 20th century

The emergence of decentralization movements in the late 20th century marked a significant turning point in the governance structures of various regions, particularly in Southeast Asia. As post-colonial states grappled with ineffective centralized government systems, substate entities (SEs) began to assume more proactive roles in political and economic arenas. This shift was characterized by enhanced engagement in international affairs, where SEs not only acted as complementary units to traditional states but also engaged in paradiplomacy, thus redefining their political agency on a global scale (Bingol et al., 2016). The growing recognition of SEs as legitimate actors in governance highlighted the limitations of rigid centralized systems and opened avenues for progressive power-sharing. This evolution ultimately demonstrated that decentralization could enhance local governance by fostering resilience and capacity-building, contrasting sharply with the stagnation often seen in centralized models (Dekker et al., 2002). Thus, the late 20th century proved pivotal for redefining governance through decentralization movements.

Key milestones in local government reforms across the region

In examining key milestones in local government reforms across Southeast Asia, it becomes evident that the trajectory of decentralization has significantly influenced democratic governance in the region. For instance, Indonesia's Reformasi era, which followed decades of autocratic rule, marked a crucial turning point as it initiated a variety of local governance reforms aimed at promoting transparency and accountability. Although these reforms were designed to curb the corruption endemic during the New Order, they also resulted in an alarming transfer of power to local elites, allowing old patterns of patronage to reemerge ((Kirana et al., 2014)). Additionally, the ongoing struggle between necessity-driven reforms and sporadic backtracking has characterized Indonesia's political landscape, reflecting a broader tension seen in other Southeast Asian nations where decentralization is both a response to demands for democracy and a source of elite competition ((Chen et al., 2014)). Thus, understanding these milestones offers critical insights into the complexities of fostering democratic governance amid diverse socio-political landscapes.

3. Case Studies of Local Government Reforms

The implementation of local government reforms in Southeast Asia serves as both a reflection of and a reaction to broader governance challenges within the region. Case studies reveal that these reforms are often driven by the urgent need to enhance democratic governance, particularly through improved transparency, accountability, and public participation. For instance, some local governments have



adopted mechanisms that allow for greater citizen engagement, which has proven essential in curbing corruption and fostering trust in public institutions. Furthermore, as indicated in recent analyses, these changes have significant implications for economic governance, influencing areas such as revenue generation and access to services (Gonzalez et al.). As Southeast Asian nations navigate their unique political landscapes, the ongoing assessment of these case studies is vital, offering critical insights into the interconnectedness of local governance and the pursuit of sustainable development (Gonzalez et al.).

Indonesia: The impact of Law No. 22/1999 on local autonomy

The implementation of Law No. 22/1999 was a pivotal moment for local autonomy in Indonesia, significantly altering the governance landscape by decentralizing power from the central government to local authorities. This transformation was intended to strengthen democratic governance by granting local governments greater responsibility in decision-making and resource allocation, thus fostering accountability and responsiveness to local needs. However, the effectiveness of such reforms has been challenged by entrenched socio-political factors that continue to influence local governance dynamics. Despite the promise of increased autonomy, local governments often struggle to navigate the complexities of agricultural extension and rural development without adequate consideration of social and political contexts, as highlighted in discussions of agricultural policies and local capacities (Brian R Cook et al., 2021). Furthermore, the potential for authoritarian tendencies within local governance structures poses questions about the sustainability of democratic principles under Law No. 22/1999, demonstrating that the landscape of local autonomy is fraught with challenges that extend beyond mere policy reforms (Ginsburg T, 2020).

Value
Article 18 of the 1945 Constitution, amended in October 1999, calls for decentralization of power and autonomy to provinces.
Some provinces have been granted additional autonomy beyond this, although Indonesia is not a federated state.
The Special Region of Yogyakarta, which was autonomous under Dutch rule, was granted special autonomy through Law No. 3 of 1950, a status maintained until the present.
Rebellion in Aceh due to demands for a stricter implementation of Islamic law has led to several shifts in political status.

Table 01: Impact of Law No. 22/1999 on Local Autonomy in Indonesia

The Philippines: The Local Government Code of 1991 and its effects

The Local Government Code of 1991 in the Philippines represents a significant step towards decentralization, aiming to enhance political accountability and effectiveness in service delivery. By empowering local governments, the Code sought to foster democratic governance amidst regional disparities. However, the outcomes reveal a complex dynamic. Studies indicate that while the Code led to improvements in certain aspects of governance, it did not fully resolve issues related to regional separatism or discontent among marginalized groups, suggesting that political accountability remains inconsistent (Hammarlund et al., 2015). Furthermore, disparities in maternal health outcomes exemplify the uneven benefits of decentralization, as the capacity of local governments to deliver essential services varies widely (Halimatusa et al., 2019). Ultimately, the experience of the Philippines underscores that decentralization can yield both opportunities and challenges, necessitating a nuanced understanding of how local governance reform interacts with broader sociopolitical factors.

Value
Transferred significant administrative and fiscal responsibilities from the national government to local government units (LGUs), enhancing local autonomy.
Facilitated more responsive and accountable governance by empowering LGUs to address local needs effectively.
Enabled LGUs to generate and manage their own revenues, leading to increased financial independence.
Promoted citizen participation in local governance through mechanisms like local development councils.
Encountered issues such as inadequate capacity, resource constraints, and political resistance affecting full realization of intended benefits.

Table 02: Effects of the Local Government Code of 1991 in the Philippines

Thailand: The 1997 Constitution and decentralization initiatives

The 1997 Constitution of Thailand was a pivotal moment in the country's journey toward decentralization, framing local governance as an essential component of democratic participation. This legal framework was intended to empower local authorities and facilitate the effective representation of community interests. However, while decentralization was designed to enhance political participation in rural areas, the reality has often diverged from this ideal. Specifically, the Tambon Administration Organization (TAO) emerged as both a product and a mechanism for decentralization, yet it illustrated the complexities of genuine political engagement, particularly in the face of governmental centralization trends that resurfaced in subsequent years. The decentralization experience reveals notable challenges, as local voices struggle to gain traction within a predominantly centralized state structure. As noted, "the real reason for decentralization is not to distribute power but to

maintain central effectiveness” (Buchenrieder et al.). This intricate balance reflects broader governance issues prevalent in Southeast Asia, emphasizing the need for more authentic participatory frameworks (Gonzalez et al.).

Vietnam: Recent reforms and the role of local governance in economic development

The recent reforms in Vietnam, particularly in the realm of local governance, play a critical role in enhancing economic development and fostering collective accountability. As decentralization strategies are implemented, local governments are increasingly empowered to manage resources and make decisions that align with regional priorities. This shift has demonstrated tangible benefits, including improved service delivery and increased community participation in development processes. Furthermore, the governance and growth nexus identified in Southeast Asia highlights the significance of effective local governance in promoting sustainable economic management and stimulating growth through better revenue generation and social spending practices (Gonzalez et al.). Moreover, the framework of political governance, which emphasizes the rule of law and citizen participation, is instrumental in mitigating corruption and fostering transparency (Gonzalez et al.). Collectively, these elements illustrate how Vietnam's local governance reforms contribute to a more robust economic landscape while adhering to principles of democratic governance.



Fig 01: This bar chart displays the positive outcomes of Vietnam's local governance reforms. Each outcome is represented, showing the percentage scores achieved in areas such as service delivery, community participation, revenue generation, social spending practices, and governance transparency. The chart visually highlights the key improvements attributed to the reforms.

4. Comparative Analysis of Outcomes

The comparative analysis of outcomes in local government reforms across Southeast Asia reveals significant disparities influenced by the degree of political accountability and public participation facilitated by decentralization. Evidence suggests that effective decentralization improves public service delivery when citizens can actively engage in governance, as seen in Indonesia, where empowered local governments exhibited enhanced performance metrics due to increased accountability mechanisms (Eckardt S). Conversely, in Thailand, the decentralization process has not guaranteed political participation and has often reinforced existing power dynamics that limit local agency (Buchenrieder et al.). This divergence highlights the necessity of not only implementing decentralization policies but also ensuring that they are coupled with robust frameworks for accountability and public engagement. Without such measures, the potential benefits of decentralization may be undermined, leading to outcomes that perpetuate inequity and disenfranchisement in governance, thus emphasizing the complex interplay between decentralization and democratic effectiveness.

Democratic participation and citizen engagement in local governance

The relationship between democratic participation and citizen engagement in local governance is undeniably complex, especially in the context of Southeast Asia's decentralization efforts. While decentralization is often heralded as a mechanism to enhance local voices and ensure that governance reflects community needs, the reality frequently falls short of these expectations. In rural Thailand, a decentralized framework has not automatically translated into increased political participation, as evidenced by the challenges that the Tambon Administration Organization (TAO) faces in fostering accountability among local actors (Buchenrieder et al.). Instead of empowering citizens, such processes may serve the central government's interests under the guise of participation, highlighting a deeper issue: the disconnect between decentralization and meaningful engagement. Furthermore, examining the Philippine context reveals that civil society plays a crucial role in reclaiming democratic spaces, suggesting that without active public participation, the promise of decentralized governance may ultimately lead to democratic regression (Gianan et al., 2018).

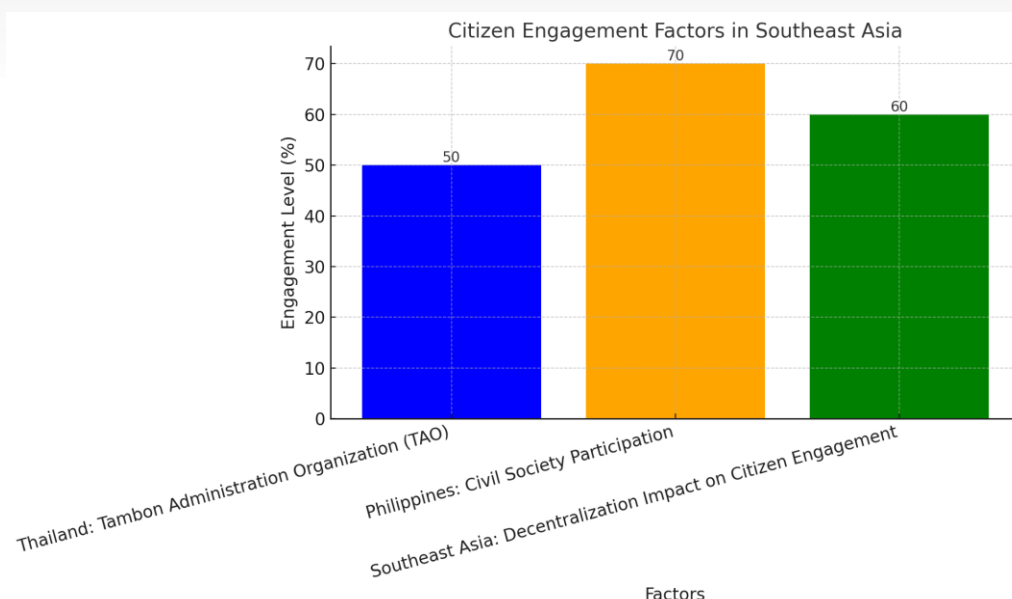


Fig. 2: This bar chart illustrates the engagement levels related to citizen participation in Southeast Asia. It compares three key factors: the effectiveness of Thailand's Tambon Administration Organization (TAO), the role of civil society participation in the Philippines, and the impact of decentralization on citizen engagement across the region. Each bar represents the percentage of engagement associated with each factor, highlighting notable differences and areas of concern in the governance and participatory frameworks of these areas.

Economic development and resource allocation at the local level

The relationship between economic development and resource allocation at the local level is fundamentally shaped by the governance frameworks established through decentralization. Effective local governance promotes efficient management of resources, enabling tailored economic initiatives that address specific community needs. Conversely, poorly designed decentralization can exacerbate inequities and stifle growth, particularly in Southeast Asia, where regional disparities are pronounced. As noted in the analysis of governance systems, the governance and growth nexus is crucial for economic management, revenue generation, and equitable social spending (Gonzalez et al.). By prioritizing local voice and participation, decentralized systems can enhance access to essential services, thereby fostering a more inclusive economic landscape. This interaction illustrates that local governments not only act as administrative units but also as vital players in driving sustainable development outcomes, underlining the importance of effective institutional frameworks in achieving desired economic growth (Gonzalez et al.).

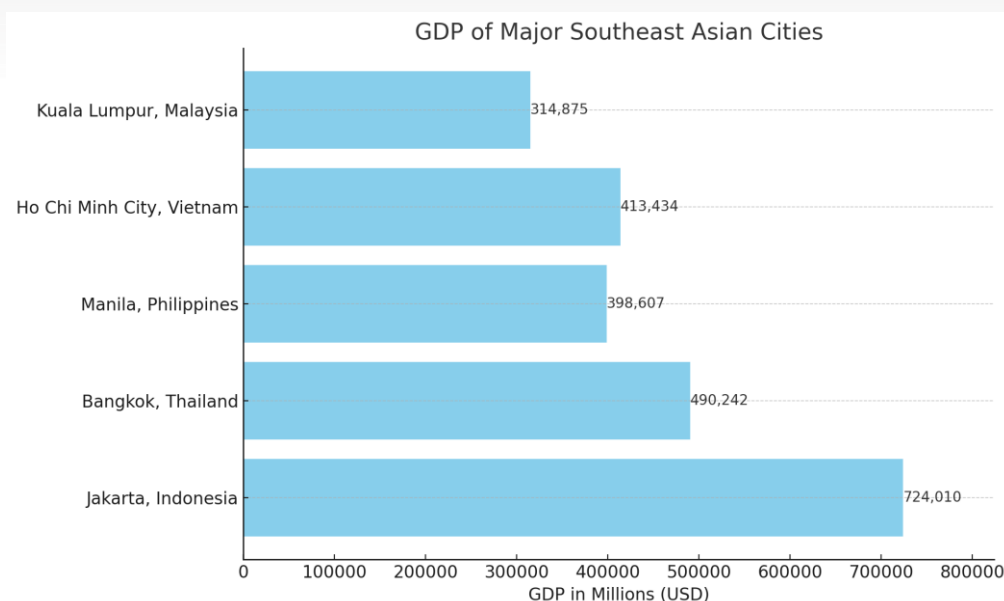


Fig 03: This chart displays the GDP of major Southeast Asian cities in millions of USD, illustrating significant economic disparities influenced by decentralization policies. Jakarta, Indonesia has the highest GDP, followed by Bangkok, Thailand, and other cities like Manila, Ho Chi Minh City, and Kuala Lumpur.

Accountability and transparency in decentralized systems

The interplay of accountability and transparency within decentralized systems is pivotal for enhancing democratic governance in Southeast Asia. Effective decentralization aims to bring government closer to the people, thereby fostering a participatory environment where citizens can hold local authorities accountable. However, the realities of local governance often reveal challenges such as bureaucratic opacity and a lack of mechanisms for public engagement. As noted, this paper explores the governance and growth nexus in Southeast Asia, analyzing critical aspects like economic management and political governance, which are essential for ensuring accountability and transparency in the decision-making processes at the local level (Gonzalez et al.). Furthermore, the importance of judicial independence and active citizen participation in conflict management underscores the need for robust systems that empower individuals to demand transparency, thus reinforcing democratic practices (Gonzalez et al.). Therefore, without effective mechanisms for accountability, the promise of decentralization risks being undermined by corrupt practices and inefficiencies.

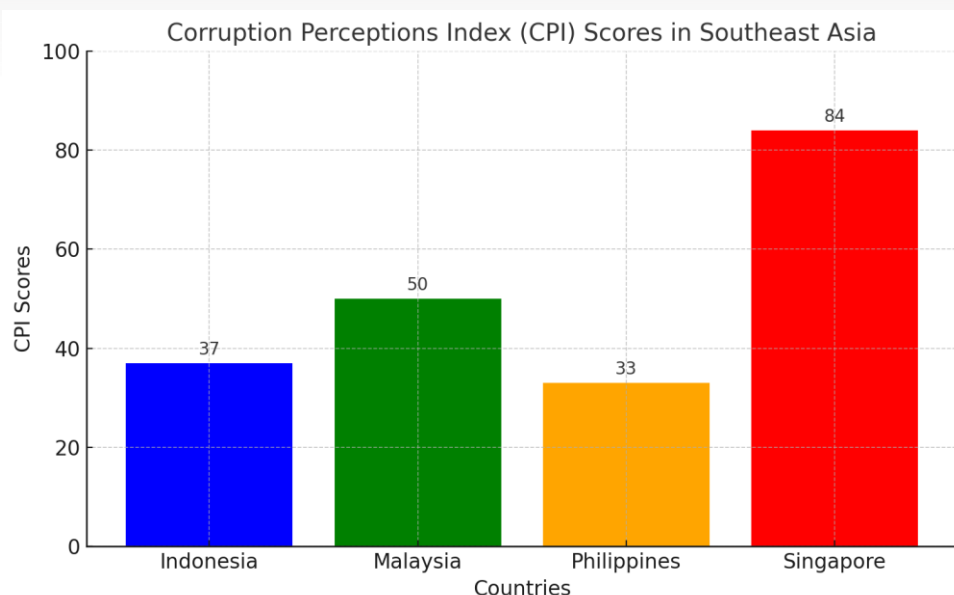


Fig 04: This bar chart displays the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) scores for several Southeast Asian countries, highlighting the differences in perceived corruption levels. Singapore has the highest score at 84, indicating lower perceived corruption, while the Philippines has the lowest at 33. The chart effectively illustrates the varying effectiveness of accountability and transparency mechanisms within these countries.

Challenges and limitations faced by local governments in Southeast Asia

Local governments in Southeast Asia encounter significant challenges that hinder effective governance and limit the overall benefits of decentralization. One pervasive issue is the lack of adequate financial resources, which affects their ability to deliver essential services such as education and healthcare. This fiscal constraint is compounded by ineffective revenue generation mechanisms that often leave local authorities dependent on central government transfers, leading to misaligned priorities and inefficiencies. Additionally, rampant corruption undermines public trust and hampers the capacity of local governments to implement developmental programs effectively, as noted in governance analyses of the region. The governance and growth nexus describes how these limitations stall socio-economic advancement, emphasizing the need for robust mechanisms that enhance transparency and accountability within local governments (Gonzalez et al.) (Gonzalez et al.). Therefore, addressing these challenges is crucial for realizing the potential of decentralized governance in fostering democratic resilience and local empowerment in Southeast Asia.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of decentralization and local government reforms in Southeast Asia reveals a complex interplay between political participation and



institutional responsiveness. While the promise of decentralization often includes heightened local engagement and accountability, the reality is frequently marred by a lack of genuine political participation, as evidenced by the centralization trends observed in Thailand's recent history (Buchenrieder et al.). The effectiveness of decentralization is contingent upon the ability of local populations to hold their governments accountable, suggesting that without robust mechanisms for public oversight, reforms may reinforce existing power structures rather than dismantle them (Eckardt S). Therefore, to achieve meaningful democratic governance, it is imperative that Southeast Asian nations prioritize not just the administrative redistribution of power but also the active empowerment of local citizens to influence decision-making processes. This dual focus will enhance service delivery and bolster the legitimacy of local governments across the region.

The comparative study on decentralization and democratic governance in Southeast Asia reveals several key findings that highlight the complex interplay between local government reforms and public sector performance. One significant outcome is the critical role of political accountability in enhancing governance; effective mechanisms allow citizens to hold officials responsible, thereby fostering improved service delivery and resource management (Eckardt S). Additionally, the study underscores the challenges encountered, particularly in Laos, where economic growth ambitions often undermine forestry governance and REDD+ initiatives. The findings indicate that governance faces considerable obstacles due to unclear carbon rights and inadequate local capacity, compounded by a lack of participation from civil society (Castella et al., 2013). Consequently, this research emphasizes that successful local governance requires not only structural reform but also the establishment of transparent and inclusive processes that empower local communities and reinforce accountability across different levels of governance.

The future of local government reforms in Southeast Asia hinges on the urgent need to enhance governance systems that address both economic and political challenges. As highlighted in recent analyses, effective decentralization could strengthen the governance and growth nexus by promoting efficient resource allocation and improving public service delivery. Institutions that encourage participation and uphold the rule of law are critical for fostering trust among citizens, thus reducing corruption and enhancing accountability in local governments. Furthermore, reforms should emphasize the importance of tailoring approaches to specific regional contexts while advocating for greater community involvement in decision-making processes. Such measures could facilitate not only revenue generation and social spending but also improve access to services and the overall cost of governance. Consequently, adopting these strategies will be pivotal for countries in Southeast Asia as they navigate the complexities of decentralization and seek to bolster democratic governance (Gonzalez et al.)(Gonzalez et al.).



The involvement of international organizations in supporting decentralization is essential for the governance reforms in Southeast Asia, as these entities provide valuable expertise, financial resources, and frameworks that facilitate local empowerment. Through their initiatives, these organizations can address critical aspects of economic and political governance, which are pivotal in ensuring effective decentralization. For instance, they contribute to enhancing revenue generation, improving access to essential services, and fostering civic engagement, thereby strengthening the nexus between governance and growth in the region (Gonzalez et al.). Furthermore, international organizations advocate for the rule of law and judicial independence, vital components that uphold democratic principles during the decentralization process (Gonzalez et al.). Consequently, their involvement leads to more accountable and efficient local governments, promoting sustainable development and enhancing citizen participation in decision-making processes. Thus, the role of these organizations appears indispensable in the pursuit of democratic governance through decentralization in Southeast Asia.

In conclusion, the intricate relationship between decentralization and democratic governance in Southeast Asia presents both opportunities and challenges that must be carefully navigated. As evidenced by Indonesia's experience, the legacy of centralized power often complicates the transition to a fully realized democratic system. The "two steps forward, one step back" pattern of reform reflects not only the necessity-driven adjustments during critical periods but also the enduring influence of patrimonial politics that can stifle progress toward genuine decentralization (Chen et al., 2014). Additionally, achieving the benefits of fiscal decentralization remains a formidable task, as poorly executed re-alignments of governmental functions can hinder effective policy implementation. Therefore, policymakers must prioritize context-specific strategies that accommodate local conditions while fostering genuine participatory governance (Ferrazzi et al., 2022). Ultimately, the pursuit of decentralization serves as a vital yet complex pathway toward enhancing democratic principles across the region.

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