

**Anthony J. Langlois, *Sexuality and Gender Diversity Rights in Southeast Asia*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022. 81 pp. ISBN: 978-1-108-92781-9.**

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In *Sexuality and Gender Diversity Rights in Southeast Asia*, Anthony J. Langlois offers new perspectives on the nature of implementation of laws, the necessity of rights claiming and the prevalence of violence and discrimination around the lives of LGBTIQ+ people. This book draws attention to the public policies, legal orders and social norms to be (re)formed in Southeast Asian regions for those who are sexually non-conforming, and hence, are treated as second (read lower) class citizens. The book also reveals both the passivity of government institutions to form queer-friendly, anti-discriminatory societal space and the activity of many regional organisations claiming LGBTIQ+ rights. In the face of rapid socio-political changes and multiple preventive measures taken up by ‘the international human rights regime’ against discriminatory forms of violence in relation to sexuality and gender diversity, Langlois argues here that “most Southeast Asian states do not recognise the need for such rights” (1). However, in response to such incapacitated geo-political frameworks and states being largely unable to socialise LGBTIQ+ rights laws among heterosexual individuals, this book considers the potentialities of many civil organisations working actively within those states and their political participation in rights claiming for the “people of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC)”. This book also attempts to connect the Southeast Asian LGBTIQ+ rights claiming movements from its regional level to the larger context of the ‘international human rights regime’.

Published under the series called *Elements in Politics and Culture in Southeast Asia*, this rather short and succinct text focuses on different constituent elements of SOGIESC rights claiming, delving into the “deeper history of sexuality and gender diversity” as well as politics in each of five Southeast Asian nation states: Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and Thailand (7). Langlois presents a comprehensive overview of the socio-political and historical understanding of gender plurality in those regions and also points towards the influence of various practices, rituals and community roles in shaping the identity of the sexual minority covering the pre-colonial past to the present moment.

Highlighting the socio-political offshoots leading to the formation of public anti-LGBTIQ+ sentiments in Indonesia, Langlois mentions the moral panic and legal challenges which subjectivise homosexual individuals within a socially confined space, leading to many physical and mental health issues. For instance, Langlois writes, “A former minister, Tifatul Sembiring, incited violence on Twitter, calling on the public to kill any gay people they found” (17). Another significant instance is mentioned by Langlois in which the Indonesian Psychiatric Association famously issued a statement “identifying LGBT people as in need of psychiatric care, with homosexuality, bisexuality and transgenderism classified as treatable mental disorders” (18). Such institutionalised forms of violence and discrimination consolidate the anti-LGBTIQ+ sentiments and homophobia within the public imagination in the second decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century Indonesia.

The core component of this book is to enlist and critically assess some recent incidents covered by SOGIESC which point to the social factors of anti-discrimination legislation, gender recognition, media portrayal, access to health services and many more issues related to the lived experience of LGBTIQ+ people. In the case of Malaysia, Langlois provides recent incidents in order to highlight how political leaders, being in a position of social hierarchy and in power, (mis)use “the accompanying media frenzy with great effect to extend and disseminate

sentiment against all forms of non-normative sexuality and gender expression” (23). This section also reveals how the hopes of Malaysia’s LGBTIQ+ community have been thwarted by all the political parties in power. At present, “LGBT people have become an open target for forces needing to establish their Islamist or Malay nationalist bona fides” (26). In the case of the Philippines, the socio-political scenario seems to appear less homophobic with its queer-friendly environment than the other nation states mentioned above. Despite the fact that in the Philippines homosexuality is not illegal, the lack of legal protections against the violence and discrimination that the LGBTIQ+ people are subjected to are evident. This part of the book points at the role of the Philippines government which remains apathetic to the formation and attestation of legal protections.

The complexities of a compromising yet conservative political system in Singapore are also considered, focusing on the government’s mission to maintain systematic discrimination and exclusion for its LGBTIQ+ citizens. Significantly, the book also reveals the ways in which the SOGIESC rights claiming has profoundly influenced other social movements like Pink Dot in Singapore in its long journey to rule out Section 377A, which criminalises LGBTIQ+ relationships. In Thailand, popularly known as a ‘queer paradise’, the social “stigma and discrimination” remain visible, despite the legal non-discriminatory measures taken by the government (43). The case studies in this book not only highlight the sufferings of a class of people and their struggles for rightful livelihood but also raise questions about the role of government organisations.

Langlois’s critical discussion of the role of civil society, including local or regional organisations, which are more effective in their emancipatory activities than the government itself, can provide scholars of LGBTIQ+ studies an insightful understanding into the socio-political realities in those regions. Significantly, these organisations emerge as sites of intersectional interactions because most sexual minorities have their social dependence on local

community support in their own local environments. For instance, Ladlad in the Philippines, or the ASEAN SOGIE Caucus (ASC), which is “a key regional umbrella organisation for advocacy and activism” (47) or the Asia-Pacific Coalition on Male Sexual Health (2007) – all these organisations help to “provide a regional hub of networking, activity and organising” (49). This section also reveals the usefulness and necessity of some international platforms like *Universal Periodic Review*, which essentially revitalises the political participation of LGBTIQ+ people. Moreover, rights claiming platforms like SOGIESC and its potentialities are, as Langlois claims, highly effective in creating a bridge between the cohesive political institutions and the diverse social conflicts around LGBTIQ+ individuals.

Besides offering a scholarly analysis of the current debates and politics around the LGBTIQ+ rights movements in Southeast Asian regions, this book emphasises the gap between legalisation of a law and the implementation of it. The book also highlights the fact that the active participation of SOGIESC with its emphasis on rights claiming and actualisation of law into LGBTIQ+ movements brings social conflicts over sexuality and gender diversity to the fore. However, this short, compact investigative document will be helpful for many local organisations, activists and social workers in other nation states in Asia or Africa to appropriate new ways of claiming the human rights, and thereby, opening up endless possibilities for global emancipatory engagements.