

Power, Politics, and Policing in Southeast Asia: An Integrative Review of Political Constraints in Law Enforcement Agencies

Altamer Alfad Hussin¹, Ahmedkhan Aubin Jumdail¹, Rexier Taurac Baculo²,

Arhakir Que Alpapara¹, Noralyza Sakib Jaam¹

¹*College of Criminal Justice Education, Department of Criminology, Mindanao State University-Sulu, Patikul, Sulu 7401, Philippines*

²*Department of Criminal Justice Education, Mindanao State University - Maigo College of Education, Science and Technology (MSU - MCEST), Maigo, Lanao del Norte, 9206, Philippines*

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Email of Corresponding Author: altamer.hussin@msusulu.edu.ph

Abstract

This integrative review synthesizes scholarly literature to examine the political constraints shaping law enforcement agencies in Southeast Asia. Given the region's diverse political systems and ongoing transformations, the study explores how power relations and political forces influence policing practices, institutional impartiality, and public trust. Using an integrative review methodology, academic databases were systematically searched, with data primarily drawn from the results and discussion sections of selected studies. The analysis identified recurring themes, contextual differences, and research gaps concerning the interaction between politics and policing. The findings reveal four interrelated political constraints. First, political interference and patronage frequently instrumentalize police forces for partisan objectives. Second, systemic corruption persists, reinforced by weak governance and limited accountability. Third, the politicization of policing intensifies during democratic transitions, compromising neutrality and professionalism. Fourth, emerging forms of digital repression and algorithmic policing are increasingly deployed to monitor information flows and suppress dissent. Together, these constraints form a deeply embedded structural web that undermines institutional integrity. This review aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), particularly targets 16.3 and 16.6, which emphasize the rule of law and accountable institutions. The findings demonstrate how political expediency weakens institutional independence, erodes public trust, and obstructs the development of transparent and rights-respecting law enforcement. By situating policing within broader political power structures, this study contributes to understanding state–society relations in Southeast Asia and highlights the need for future comparative research to support institutional reform consistent with SDG 16.

Keywords: Police; Policing; Political Constraints; Southeast Asia; Law Enforcement;

1. Introduction

The complex interplay among political power, governance structures, and the operational modalities of law enforcement agencies constitutes a critical area of academic inquiry, particularly pronounced in the evolving geopolitical context of Southeast Asia. This region, marked by its heterogeneous political systems, rapid socioeconomic transformations, and intricate societal fabrics, presents a compelling environment to examine this relationship. Policing, traditionally conceived as a fundamental apparatus of state authority and a guardian of social order, is not insulated from political forces; rather, it is deeply interwoven with and profoundly shaped by prevailing political currents and power configurations (deLisle, 2023). Such influences extend across a spectrum, encompassing formal legislative and institutional frameworks, as well as informal political pressures and endemic corruption, all of which ultimately determine the operational efficiency, perceived impartiality, and public confidence reposed in law enforcement institutions (deLisle, 2023).

Within the broader East Asian context, including Southeast Asian nations, the analysis of authoritarian policing presents multifaceted conceptual challenges. Patterns of policing behavior are frequently understood through an examination of police functions, internal institutional architectures, and their hierarchical relationships with incumbent regimes (deLisle, 2023). Academic research consistently reveals that law enforcement bodies often confront paradoxical scenarios where statutory provisions simultaneously confer authority and impose limitations, and where reform initiatives can either lead to more benevolent practices (from a liberal perspective) or augment their capacity as instruments of state control (deLisle, 2023). Issues of political interference and patronage are particularly salient. For example, in Thailand, political patronage has demonstrably transformed the police into a political instrument, thereby impeding democratic reform efforts (Wong,

2022). Likewise, in Indonesia, the politicization of the police and external hindrances have been identified as primary obstacles to police reform progression during its democratic transition (Baker, 2012; Davies, 2021).

Police corruption constitutes another pervasive constraint, particularly evident in nations such as Indonesia and the Philippines. This phenomenon is often intensified by challenging governance contexts, inadequate remuneration, bureaucratic complexities, non-meritocratic recruitment processes, and systemic accountability deficits (Quah, 2019). Scholarly discourse increasingly frames the amelioration of police corruption in Southeast Asia within the broader perspectives of political will, civic participation, and public management reform, concurrently underscoring the imperative of professionalism for upholding justice, transparency, and human rights (Karimullah, 2024; Ngich & Cho, 2020). Moreover, factors such as political instability, external influences, and leadership deficiencies contribute significantly to the operational challenges confronting security organizations (Ferreira et al., 2018). The profound impact of political dynamics is further manifested in the evolving roles of law enforcement. In the Philippines, for instance, the executive retains constitutional authority to deploy armed forces in internal security operations, thereby demonstrating significant political influence over both military and police functions and deployments (Arugay, 2023; Hall, 2004; Ravanilla et al., 2021; Teehankee, 2022). Beyond conventional policing, contemporary governmental technologies are increasingly employed for 'algorithmic policing' in digital realms, serving to manage public discourse and suppress dissent in countries like Thailand and the Philippines (Talamayan, 2020).

This integrative review is designed to systematically synthesize the extant scholarly literature regarding the complex political constraints that impinge upon law enforcement within the region. Through a rigorous examination of how political forces both, explicit state interventions and subtle informal pressures, either obstruct or reorient the fundamental functions of policing, this review endeavors to identify recurring thematic patterns, elucidate contextual divergences, and pinpoint critical lacunae in current research. A comprehensive grasp of these political constraints is indispensable for apprehending the systemic challenges confronting law enforcement in its mandate to uphold justice, ensure security, and effectively adapt to the unique regional specificities. Ultimately, this work is intended to foster a more sophisticated understanding of state-society relations across Southeast Asia, yielding valuable insights into the broader ramifications for governance paradigms, human rights protection, and the rule of law within inherently politically charged operational environments.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

This study employed an integrative review design to systematically synthesize scholarly literature on political constraints affecting law enforcement agencies in Southeast Asia. The integrative review approach was selected because it allows the inclusion and combination of diverse forms of evidence, including empirical studies and theoretical works, to develop a comprehensive understanding of complex institutional and political phenomena. As noted by Whittemore and Knafl (2005) and Kutcher and LeBaron (2022), this method supports critical evaluation, comparison, and synthesis of findings across different research traditions. Through this approach, the study sought to identify dominant political constraints, examine their manifestations across national contexts, synthesize existing theoretical and empirical perspectives on power and policing, and identify gaps in the current body of literature to inform future research.

2.2 Study Selection Procedure

Following the initial database search, all retrieved records were compiled and subjected to a systematic screening process. Duplicate studies were removed prior to screening. Titles and abstracts were first reviewed to determine relevance to political influences on law enforcement in Southeast Asia. Studies that met the initial criteria were then examined in full text to ensure alignment with the scope and objectives of the review. This staged screening procedure ensured that only relevant and methodologically appropriate sources were included in the final synthesis.

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The selection of studies was guided by clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Included sources consisted of peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly book chapters, and dissertations that examined law enforcement agencies and their interaction with political power or governance structures. Both empirical and theoretical studies were considered, provided they focused on Southeast Asian countries or offered comparative insights directly relevant to the region. Only studies published in English were included. Conversely, non-academic publications, such as news reports and opinion pieces, were excluded, as were studies that did not directly address political constraints on policing or that focused on contexts outside Southeast Asia without clear regional relevance.

2.4 Data Extraction

Relevant data from each included study were systematically extracted using a standardized data extraction form to maintain consistency across sources. Extracted information included basic study characteristics such as authorship, year of publication, country or regional focus, and research design, as well as substantive findings related to political constraints

on law enforcement agencies. Attention was also given to the theoretical frameworks employed, the documented effects of political influence on policing practices, effectiveness, and accountability, and any research gaps or recommendations identified by the authors. To ensure analytical focus, data extraction emphasized the results and discussion sections of each study, where interpretations and evidence were most explicitly articulated.

2.5 Data Synthesis and Analysis

The extracted data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method well suited for integrative reviews that incorporate diverse qualitative and quantitative evidence. Initial coding was conducted to identify recurring concepts and patterns related to power, politics, and policing. These codes were then organized into broader categories and refined into overarching themes that captured the nature and manifestations of political constraints on law enforcement across Southeast Asia. Cross-context comparisons were undertaken to examine similarities and differences across countries and political systems. The final stage involved integrating these themes to generate higher-level insights, highlight contradictions in the literature, and identify underexplored areas requiring further investigation. This systematic and rigorous analytical process enhanced the credibility, transparency, and reproducibility of the review, consistent with established standards for integrative literature reviews.

3. Results and Discussion

This integrative review, synthesizing findings primarily from the results and discussion sections of selected academic literature, illuminates significant political constraints impinging upon law enforcement agencies across Southeast Asia. These constraints frequently manifest in an interwoven manner, compromising the impartiality, operational efficacy, and public legitimacy of policing within the region. The analysis revealed four overarching themes: pervasive political interference and patronage, systemic corruption, the complex politicization of police during periods of democratic transition, and the emergent role of digital repression.

3.1. Political Interference and Patronage

Political interference and patronage represent widespread and substantial limitations on law enforcement autonomy throughout Southeast Asia. These dynamics often co-opt police forces, transforming them into instruments that serve specific political agendas rather than independent bodies upholding the rule of law (Pangaribuan, 2025; Wong, 2022). For instance, in Thailand, evidence suggests that political patronage has demonstrably led to police officers being manipulated by businessman-politicians, who use them to suppress political adversaries and dissent through selective law enforcement and criminal investigations (Wong, 2022). This indicates that the established practices of authoritarian policing can persist even through periods of democratic change, suggesting that democratization may have minimal effects on deeply entrenched authoritarian practices within policing (deLisle, 2023; Mérieau, 2023). The intricate relationships, both hierarchical with the ruling regime and lateral with other state institutions, are crucial determinants of these patterns (deLisle, 2023). Furthermore, political instability and governmental shifts can impede sustained reform efforts, allowing established military and police structures to resist fundamental changes and maintain existing power configurations (Kim et al., 2024).

3.2. Systemic Corruption in Policing

Police corruption stands as a persistent and severe political constraint, particularly acute in nations such as Indonesia and the Philippines (Quah, 2019). The drivers of this systemic issue are multifaceted, encompassing challenging governance environments, inadequate remuneration for officers, extensive bureaucratic red tape, non-meritocratic recruitment and promotion systems, and insufficient accountability mechanisms (Quah, 2019; Singh, 2022). Manifestations of corruption range from petty illicit transactions and protection rackets to more severe acts such as evidence tampering and disloyalty to the state (Singh, 2022). Such practices erode public trust in both the police and the government (Singh, 2022). Initiatives to combat police corruption typically necessitate robust political will, active public participation, and comprehensive public management reforms, with a strong emphasis on fostering professionalism, transparency, and adherence to human rights principles (Karimullah, 2024; Ngich & Cho, 2020). Moreover, inter-agency conflicts, frequently driven by power struggles and institutional self-preservation, further complicate anti-corruption endeavors, especially when exacerbated by patronage politics both internally and externally (Pangaribuan, 2025). Significant levels of corruption are also demonstrably linked to transnational criminal activities, including human trafficking and migrant smuggling, across the region (Lelliott & Miller, 2023).

3.3. Politicization During Democratic Transitions

The role of police forces frequently undergoes intense politicization, particularly pronounced during phases of democratic transition. In Indonesia, the politicization of law enforcement and external impediments have been identified as primary barriers to advancing police reform in its post-authoritarian context (Davies, 2021). While the post-authoritarian era saw the Indonesian National Police separate from the armed forces (ABRI/TNI), thereby restoring police authority over domestic security, the relationship between these institutions has been characterized by a dynamic interplay of conflict,

competition, and cooperation contingent on the prevailing strategic environment (Baker, 2012; Yulianto, 2023). This underscores the complex evolution from military-authoritarian control to civil-judicial authority. Law enforcement officials perpetually face a dilemma between upholding professional standards and succumbing to political pressures, especially when their institutional roles are deeply entwined with political power structures (Karimullah, 2024).

3.4. Digital Repression and Algorithmic Policing

An increasingly prominent and critical political constraint is the utilization of emerging governmental technologies for digital repression, often termed "algorithmic policing" or "cyber policing" (Talamayan, 2020). This involves the deployment of digital tools to manipulate public discourse, instill fear, and suppress dissent within online public spheres (Talamayan, 2020). In countries like Thailand and the Philippines, governments actively engage in these practices, employing them to control information flows and manage citizen behavior in cyberspace (Talamayan, 2020). Several Southeast Asian autocracies, including Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam, have politicized vague definitions of "fake news" to legitimize diverse tactics of digital repression (Sombatpoonsiri & Luong, 2022). This enables them to criminalize individuals accused of disseminating such information under the pretext of safeguarding public interests (Sombatpoonsiri & Luong, 2022). These allegations are also leveraged to pressure technology companies into content removal and to intensify online surveillance (Sombatpoonsiri & Luong, 2022). Such developments highlight how the convergence of political actors, state policies, and social networks profoundly shapes the nature and structure of policing practices in the digital domain (Talamayan, 2020).

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that political constraints are not merely external pressures but are frequently deeply ingrained within the institutional frameworks and operational procedures of law enforcement agencies in Southeast Asia. This significantly impacts their capacity for impartial and effective functioning.

3.5. Discussion

This integrative review synthesizes a substantial body of literature to elucidate the multifaceted political constraints that shape law enforcement agencies in Southeast Asia. The findings reveal a complex interplay where political power frequently compromises the independence, effectiveness, and public trust in policing, diverging significantly from idealized models of impartial law enforcement. The identified themes—political interference and patronage, systemic corruption, politicization during democratic transitions, and digital repression—are not isolated phenomena but rather interconnected manifestations of a deeper institutional struggle between political expediency and the principles of rule of law.

The pervasive nature of political interference and patronage highlights how external political actors and internal power structures can transform police forces into instruments for maintaining political order or suppressing dissent, rather than serving as neutral arbiters of justice (deLisle, 2023; Wong, 2022). This dynamic is particularly evident in contexts where authoritarian legacies persist or where democratic institutions remain fragile (Mérieau, 2023). The implications extend beyond individual cases of misconduct, undermining the very legitimacy of law enforcement as an impartial public service. When police are perceived as political tools, public cooperation diminishes, trust erodes, and the effectiveness of crime fighting is inherently compromised. The resistance to fundamental reform, even during periods of political transition, further underscores the entrenched nature of these politically driven challenges (Kim et al., 2024).

Systemic corruption emerges as a critical consequence and perpetuating factor of political constraints (Quah, 2019). It is not merely an ethical lapse of individuals but an institutionalized practice often enabled by weak governance, inadequate resources, and a lack of accountability (Singh, 2022). The links between corruption and political patronage are strong, with corrupt practices often serving to maintain loyalty and control within police ranks, or to generate illicit revenue that benefits political actors. The challenges posed by inter-agency conflicts, frequently influenced by internal and external patronage, further complicate efforts to combat corruption, creating a cycle where political influence hinders accountability (Pangaribuan, 2025). Moreover, the findings demonstrate that corruption in law enforcement is not only a domestic issue but also facilitates transnational criminal enterprises, such as human trafficking, linking local political constraints to broader regional security concerns (Lelliott & Miller, 2023).

The analysis of politicization during democratic transitions reveals a complex and often contradictory process. While transitions may promise reform and a move towards more civilian oversight, the deep historical ties between police and military, as seen in Indonesia, mean that political interests continue to exert significant influence (Baker, 2012; Davies, 2021; Yulianto, 2023). The "dilemma between professionalism and political interests" (Karimullah, 2024) becomes acute, as police agencies navigate pressures to remain loyal to shifting political masters while simultaneously attempting to professionalize and uphold legal standards. This tension can lead to inconsistent application of the law, selective enforcement, and a struggle for institutional autonomy that is far from resolved in many Southeast Asian nations.

Finally, the rise of digital repression and algorithmic policing presents a contemporary and evolving political constraint (Talamayan, 2020). This development signifies a new frontier where political power extends into the digital realm to control

information, suppress dissent, and manipulate public opinion. The weaponization of "fake news" allegations (Sombatpoonsiri & Luong, 2022) as a pretext for criminalizing online expression and intensifying surveillance demonstrates how new technologies are being co-opted to serve political agendas, effectively extending traditional forms of policing into cyberspace. This not only infringes on civil liberties but also creates an environment of fear and self-censorship, further consolidating political control through technological means.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

This integrative review has systematically synthesized scholarly literature to illuminate the profound and multifaceted political constraints that significantly impact law enforcement agencies across Southeast Asia. We identified four interconnected and pervasive themes: widespread political interference and patronage, systemic corruption, the intricate politicization of police during democratic transitions, and the emergent phenomenon of digital repression (Talamayan, 2020).

These constraints are not merely external pressures but are deeply embedded within the institutional fabric and operational modalities of policing in the region. They frequently compromise the impartiality, operational efficacy, and public legitimacy of law enforcement, diverting from idealized models of neutral justice (deLisle, 2023). Political interference often transforms police into instruments for specific political agendas (Pangaribuan, 2025; Wong, 2022), while systemic corruption, exacerbated by weak governance, inadequate remuneration, and a lack of accountability, further erodes public trust (Philippine Development Plan 2023-2028, 2023; Quah, 2019; Singh, 2022). The politicization experienced during democratic transitions highlights the ongoing struggle between professional standards and political allegiances, particularly given historical ties between police and military forces (Baker, 2012; Davies, 2021; Yulianto, 2023). Furthermore, the rise of digital repression and algorithmic policing represents a contemporary challenge (Talamayan, 2020), as governmental technologies are weaponized to control information, suppress dissent, and manipulate public discourse online in countries like Thailand and the Philippines (Talamayan, 2020). This signifies a new frontier where political power extends into the digital realm (Talamayan, 2020).

Ultimately, these findings underscore a critical institutional struggle between political expediency and the fundamental principles of the rule of law. A comprehensive understanding of these dynamics is crucial for comprehending the systemic challenges confronting law enforcement in Southeast Asia, influencing state-society relations, governance paradigms, human rights protection, and the potential for truly independent and effective policing in inherently politically charged environments.

While this review offers a comprehensive synthesis, its limitations include a reliance on published academic literature predominantly in English, potentially overlooking insights in local languages. Future research should focus on more in-depth comparative empirical studies that examine the mechanisms through which political interference manifests at different levels of law enforcement in diverse Southeast Asian contexts. Research could also explore the effectiveness of various reform initiatives in mitigating political constraints, particularly those focused on institutional autonomy, accountability, and professional development (Kim et al., 2024). Given the rise of digital repression, further investigation into the specific technologies, actors, and impacts of algorithmic policing in the region is warranted (Talamayan, 2020). Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of police-state relations during and after democratic transitions would provide invaluable insights into the enduring nature of political constraints, fostering more accountable, transparent, and rights-respecting law enforcement agencies in Southeast Asia.

Compliance with ethical standards

This study followed accepted academic and ethical standards for integrative literature reviews. As it relied solely on published sources, no human participants or primary data were involved.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no financial or personal conflicts of interest.

Statement of ethical approval

Ethical approval was not required, as the study involved only secondary data from publicly available literature.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was not applicable, as no human participants were involved in the study.

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