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Foreword

Democracy is about the meaningful participation of citizens in politics. Elections are the most powerful way for people to participate in modern, representative democracies. A necessary instrument for participation is the electoral system. If this does not allow citizens to express their political choices and preferences, elections can become an almost meaningless exercise. Electoral systems determine seemingly technical details, such as the constitutional choice between the plurality system and proportional representation, but these significantly influence the parameter of electoral politics in any democratic system.

As described in more detail in the Introduction by Aurel Croissant, the empirical studies in this book look at the relationship between elections and democratic development in Southeast and East Asia. Seven out of nine political systems with multi-party elections at the national level have been selected. Most of the studies have been written by citizens of the respective countries.

Looking at the range of countries we have chosen, the diversity of political regimes and electoral systems is immense. Some countries have a long (if interrupted) history of democracy, while the democratic experience of others has been relatively short. Cambodia, for instance, only had its first national elections in 1993, after 30 years of civil war. In this case, it can be clearly seen that even reasonably clean elections do not guarantee a consolidated democracy. Democratic development is as much influenced by the political culture in between elections as it is by elections themselves. Nevertheless, elections are one step towards familiarizing people with democracy and setting up democratic processes.

There are countries in which 'managing' elections has turned into an intricate if doubtful art. Again, the conduct of elections may be unobjectionable, but at the same time, it is apparent that the electoral systems are designed in such a way that the playing field is hardly level for all participants, and popular choices may be insufficiently translated into parliamentary voices.

This book had its origins in the co-operation between the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung offices in South Korea and Thailand, and Aurel Croissant from the University of Heidelberg. Later, the Singapore Office for Regional Co-operation took over the co-ordination of the publishing. We wish to thank Professor Dr Peter Mayer, former Residential Representative of Friedrich Ebert Stiftung-Seoul, for coming up with the initial idea of producing this book. We would also like to thank Christian Bruder and Timo Freudenberger (Heidelberg) for their most valuable research assistance.

We hope that this publication will stimulate further discussion on the topic of electoral systems and on the institutional reforms which are suggested by the authors.

Aurel Croissant, Gabriele Bruns and Marei John

Editors