Bangkok, Jakarta, Manila, and Singapore

TREVOR HOGAN
LA TROBE UNIVERSITY
MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

A bomb outside the Australian Embassy in Jakarta; the Australian Ambassador held hostage in a failed coup against the government in Manila; a journalist killed in Bangkok: these are the media reports and images that bring Southeast Asian cities to the attention of Australians. Even without the specter of political violence, Australians don't need to look for reasons to fear big, noisy, dirty, dangerous, crowded, smelly, poor Southeast Asian cities. The emergent middle and old wealthy classes of these cities also commonly share these views. Seeking to block out the poor and the externalities of urban disorder, the indigenous rich of Southeast Asian cities embrace private solutions to public problems.

Fear of the urban poor and mega-cities is fed by daily doses of bad news in the media and professional paranoia indices provided by travel insurance corporations. The London-based Control Risks Group (http://www.citibrief.com), for example, provides a regular global survey of cities to its business clientele. It ranks risk factors on a scale from 1 to 5. Manila currently has a high-risk "5" rating while Bangkok and Jakarta are considered marginally safer at "4." Compare this to Melbourne's "3" and the world's safest city, Singapore, ranked "1." Singapore might be safe but it is also frequently sneered at by outsiders as boring and puritanical. Such generalizations are neither fair nor accurate: Singapore is anything but boring just as the frisson of Bangkok, Jakarta, and Manila is not simply an outcome of danger and disorder but is derived from the intrinsic qualities of exuberant, inventive urbanism.

Culture is what the mega-cities have in amplitude. Bangkok, Jakarta, and Manila are major sites of religious learning, pilgrimages and festivals, and sex trafficking. All three cities have food cultures to satiate epicureans. Their music, art, and film have yet to find their

global entrepreneurs, though Bangkok is emerging as Southeast Asia's New York where musicians and DJs are just as likely to be Filipino or Indonesian as Thai or American. Their design cultures are rich and complex, and again are undersold as urban achievements even to their own resident middle class. The creative appropriation of global culture and technology is an everyday achievement on the streets. In Manila, there are "Taglish," a new hybrid language of Tagalog and English, and "Jollibee," the homegrown fast-food chain that outsells McDonalds. In part response to traffic jams, Manilans are the world's leading SMS text messengers.

Singapore is the only city in South-East Asia that is unequivocally a *global city* and arguably the only successful tropical city in the world. It is a strategic site in the global economy with a concentration of high-level producer-service firms oriented to world markets. It is the busiest seaport and airport hub in the region, and its two leading universities rank in the top fifty universities in the world. Going from colonial *entrêpot* to independent city-state (unusual in the nation-state system today) in three decades, it is an ultra-modern, efficient, livable and multi-cultural city that combines liberal capitalism and public planning. The public transport is fast and reliable, the infrastructure is good, and the utilities are clean and efficient. The housing (80% public housing) is high-density but all citizens have access to waterfronts, gardens, paths, and cycle-ways. Singapore's communalist democracy — with an authoritarian form of parliamentary politics and segregated communities along ethnic lines — is liberalizing, and we are witnessing the first signs of a cosmopolitan pluralism. Singapore's success represents an inspiration to other tropical cities. Kuala Lumpur mimics its patterns of development. In recent years, Singapore has focused on trading in knowledge capital while outsourcing manufacturing. One consequence is an urban growth region crossing the Malaysian, Singapore and Indonesian borders. In the 21st century the wild frontier town is not in the American west but in locales such as the Indonesian island of Batam, a 20-minute ferry trip from the gleaming towers of downtown Singapore.

But Singapore has only 4 million people. One hundred years ago the world was agog at a city of comparable size — London — at the time the most important metropolis in the world's largest ever empire. London was also labeled the "city of dreadful night" for the same

qualities of danger, dirt, disorder and poverty that mar the cities of the Third World today. These days we say "only 4 million" because this is the age of *mega-cities*. There are now 21 cities in the world of over 10 million people each, and mega-urban regions called *network cities* (including Boston to Washington DC; Tokyo to Osaka; and the Pearl River Delta region in Southeast China). The nature of urban problems is not new, though the number of urban dwellers, the size of cities, and the speed of urban growth challenge human ingenuity.

Urbanization — the movement of populations from the countryside to the city — is arguably the most significant demographic global trend of the past century. Rural-urban migration is as much about the push from rural poverty as it is the pull of urban amenities. Over the last thirty years, the Southeast Asian region has witnessed exponential urban growth rates. By the year 2010, some 270 million Southeast Asians will be urban residents. In addition to the three mega-cities of Bangkok, Jakarta, and Manila, there are a further ten cities with one million or more people, all of which have annual growth rates of between two and four percent. Over 40% of these populations are below the age of 16 years. The World Commission on Cities classify them as *"cities coping with informal hyper-growth,"* that is, cities marked by large, youthful populations of high growth, high birth rates, low death rates, and large immigration from rural areas. Nearly 50 per cent of their denizens are poor, work in the non-organized, informal economy, and live in home-made housing in fragmented, sprawling settlements with inadequate infrastructure, social services, transport connections, and poor urban governance.[1] This contrasts to *"cities coping with dynamic growth,"* such as contemporary Kuala Lumpur and East Asian cities, and *"mature cities coping with ageing,"* such as Singapore and Australian metropolises, which exhibit ageing populations, low population growth rates(except for Perth and Brisbane), and highly formalized infrastructure, economic and social orders.

Bangkok, Jakarta, and Manila are mega-cities, with populations of 10, 14 and 12 million people resident in their greater metropolitan regions. Daytime populations can almost double these figures. All three cities have been subject to rapid urban growth since the sixties.

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[1] See Peter Hall and Ulrich Pfeiffer, *Urban Future 21: A Global Agenda for Twenty-First Century Cities* (London: E and FN Spon, 2002).

The population density of these cities (149, 171 and 198 people per ha) is higher than that of European cities (approximately 40 to 60 persons per ha) and is much higher than North American and Australian cities (12 to 25 persons per ha). Metro Manila, for example, squeezes 12 million people into an area roughly a third that Greater Melbourne takes to house 3.5 million people. The sheer densities of these Asian cities are a large part of the fear reaction evoked in the average Australian or American tourist and is also part of their exotic allure.

As cities of informal hyper-growth, Bangkok, Jakarta and Manila have many things in common. Still, we should not gloss over their different histories, cultures, and social imaginaries. These differences drive divergent futures whatever the homogenizing forces of economic and technological globalization. All three cities are maritime ports located on river delta plains. The ecology of Southeast Asia consists of a series of archipelagoes, peninsulas and islands linked by port cities. Water is source, resource, and symbol of life for the whole region. Its cities are subject to flooding and Bangkok (like Venice) is sinking. Manila has additional natural challenges of volcanoes, earthquakes, and typhoons. These cities do not have adequate emergency services to cope with natural disasters. The traditional coping technique has been to build light, flexible, tensile houses. This is still the strategy of the urban poor today, borne of necessity. Modern infrastructures ignore local ecologies. Speed, convenience, and cost-minimization are the driving forces of construction. Mass production of sustainable architecture, infrastructure, and urban design in tropical cities is yet to arrive.

Bangkok, Jakarta, and Manila are not only mega-cites. Each is also a *primate city*, the first city in a national urban hierarchy. They dominate the economic activities, and represent up to 15% of the total populations, of their nations. As national *capital cities*, they are the theatres of national politics: they house the headquarters of national government's institutions of parliament, judiciary, treasury, military, and the public service. They are also storehouses of wealth, history, cultural heritage, and knowledge, accumulated in museums, galleries, libraries, archives, and memorials. Above all, capital cities are theatres of nation-state self-mythologization. Here are the plazas, boulevards, and monuments that commemorate the nation's narratives. Here too are the sites of major political struggles, rallies and protests for and against the state.

That these cities still exist and continue to grow represent impressive feats of collective will. Manila, the "Havana of the Pacific" in the early part of the twentieth century, has been the site of two revolutions (1896; 1987), two wars (1898-1904; 1942-1945), several major earthquakes, and many typhoons. Jakarta too was damaged by war, then by revolution (1949). Both Bangkok and Manila were central to America's cold war military strategies especially in conducting its campaigns in Indo-China. American presence in turn led to the establishment of regional organizations, some international financial organizations, and the rapid growth of the sex industries. These cities are major world traders in a highly-organized (and largely illegal) globalized sex industry. Poverty is the ongoing source of a seemingly inexhaustible conveyor belt of young sex workers. Alternative routes from poverty for young women in Bangkok, Jakarta, and Manila involve marrying rich foreigners, or working overseas. Overseas workers represent the number one source of export-income of the Philippines' economy. Women in particular work as nannies and domestic servants in cities such as Singapore and Hong Kong.

Whereas Singapore is a modern colonial invention, Southeast Asian mega-cities have longer histories. Bangkok and Jakarta reflect their origins as pre-modern trading ports, religious and court cultures. Both the spatial forms and meanings of Bangkok are shaped by the centrality of Buddhism in the Thai social imaginary. Filipino cities originate in the plans and oversight of Spanish religious orders and secular (often military) governors using indigenous labor. Manila was colonized by the Spanish for over 3 centuries and by the US for a further 40 years. Jakarta started out as a Dutch colonial port and remained so until 1949. Bangkok was never officially colonized, but centuries of empire shaped its city and cultural politics. The trading houses of all the cities of the region are dominated by diasporic Chinese migrating from the South coast of China. If Manila is the region's Mexico City, then Singapore is Southeast Asia's Chinese maritime port *par excellence*. Today, all three mega-cities consist of a mélange of historic cores with fortresses and temples, mid-twentieth century nationalist, monumentalist and city-beautiful style precincts, modern commercial districts with high rise condominiums, and a sprawling patchwork of urban squatter zones, mega-malls, and middle-class gated communities. Both poor and

rich alike live in corporate cities: the poor of their own design and construction, the rich modeled on North American fantasies.

Since World War Two, national development goals have had priority over urban policy. Nevertheless, the primacy of these cities is no historical accident and their success is crucial to the welfare and viability of the nation-states themselves. Effective governance strategies for these cities are of the highest importance. Economic development without ecological and social development is not a viable option. The vitality, self-reliance, and creativity of the urban poor must be harnessed if mega-cities are also to be sustainable and livable cities. Large metro plans and big infrastructure projects are important but so are small, local steps. A mix of local knowledge and energies, major international capital projects, government planning, and NGOs: these are the stuff of an urban politics of hope. No fear. ⬧