



Winning their place in the city: Squatters in Southeast Asian cities



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ABSTRACT

Variations in squatter mobilization and the structure of political elites are shown to be related to the integration of squatters into formal housing recent history of squatter acquisition of a place in the cities of Southeast Asia. The cities analyzed are Hong Kong (China), Singapore, Jakarta (Indonesia), Bangkok (Thailand), Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) and Manila (the Philippines). Squatter activity in each one is analyzed from the Post-WW II period of the 1950's and 1960's, to the contemporary situation of 2015. Each of these cases can be characterized at the beginning of the period, as having large numbers of squatters and squatter settlements, with few or no adequate housing, municipal services, etc. Each one of them dominated by economic elites in the form of conglomerates. The analysis describes the initial conditions of squatters, major shifts and events during the last fifty or so years, and the different outcomes in the struggles for place in the cities. The analysis is based upon observations, interviews and institutional materials gathered by the author in the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's and from interviews, reports and institutional data currently available on each case. The analysis in these six case studies show that a unified political elite, little or no squatter mobilization and government control or ownership of the land, were the most important institutional factors in integrating squatters into cities. Singapore, Hong Kong and Kuala Lumpur integrated all or most squatters into the formal housing of their cities.

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1. Introduction: squatter outcomes in the six cities, 1950s–2015

Early in the period at the end of World War II, the breakdown of, or liberation from, colonial rule, released millions of rural residents in the former colonial empires to migrate to larger primate cities in search of work. The rush to the cities, urbanization, was understood as the consequence of the push off the land due to over population or conflict and the pull of opportunity in the dominant city centers. Urban administration, or more usually, the elite dominating the megacity and the country, was left to deal with this influx. As UN-HABITAT put it near the end of the 1990's, "illegal or informal land markets have provided the land sites for most additions to the housing stock in most cities of the South over the last 30 or 40 years" (1996, p. 239).

The populations of these six metropolitan areas grew at an astounding rate during the period under study. The population of these urban agglomerations is difficult to determine precisely because of the geographic expansion of each of their expansion into the surrounding hinterland. This includes the legal expansion of the

boundaries of some of these cities. The city-state of Singapore is on an island, so its expansion is limited. However, by filling in the surrounding sea and creating many new towns on the reclaimed land, as well as more intensive use of available land in nurseries, cemeteries and other low-density land use, Singapore was able to handle an increase in population from 1.7 million in 1960 to 5.4 million in 2013; an increase of 227 percent during the last fifty years (Trading Economics, n.d.). Another one of the six with restricted geographic boundaries is Hong Kong. Leased from the People's Republic of China by Great Britain during most of the period under consideration and declared a Special Administrative region of China when the lease expired in 1997, it grew from 3.1 million in 1960 to the current 7.2 million, an increase of 134 percent (Trading Economics, 2014). So the boundaries were also stable. The megacity consists of the island of Hong Kong, the tip of the peninsula including Kowloon and the New Territories, and several smaller surrounding islands. The government of Hong Kong also created new towns by filling in the sea. They had programs to intensify the use of land by clearing it of squatters and others and selling it on the open land market. The Government then used the revenue thus gained to clear and rehouse other squatter areas.

Jakarta, in Indonesia, was a Megacity of 7.9 million in 1975, expanding to 17.0 million in 2015. There are 28 million people in

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the metropolitan area of *Jabodetabek* ([World Population Review, 2014b](#)) Manila went from 5.0 to 12.9 million during that period ([World Population Review, 2014d](#)). Both of these countries pulled migrants to the metropolitan center from the surrounding rice-growing regions. Bangkok, Thailand (also known as *Krung Thep Maha Nakhon*) had a population of 2,151,000 in 1960. The current population is estimated at 8.5 million to 10.1 million ([World Population Review, 2014a](#)). Kuala Lumpur, the Federal District of Malaysia, had a population of 344,000 in 1960. This rose to 1.67 million in 2014. The newly expanded Metropolitan area, Greater Kuala Lumpur or the Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Area (KLMA), has a total population currently of 7 million people ([World Population Review, 2014c](#)).

Squatters are persons who live on land in a city without owning it. They may be very poor or of moderate income. The building may be a shanty without water, electric or sewage services, or may be well-built homes, but the occupants have no legal tenure in the property.

The initial response of governments faced with this influx were quite similar: forced relocation, with or without fires, to burn the squatters out or soldiers or the police ([Smart, 2002](#)). Positive approaches shifted over time from sites and services and self help ([Turner, 1976](#)) to national and international non-governmental organizations (NGO) and local builders ([Aldrich and Sandhu, 1995](#)), to a more recent emphasis on creating a liberal market economy for housing with the state providing an enabling role ([Pugh, 1995; Pugh, 2001](#)).

The figures show what has happened to squatters over the period from the 1960's to the 2010's: Singapore, Hong Kong and Kuala Lumpur, with an integrated elite and no mobilized squatter organizations with resources, rehoused all or almost all of the members of the informal settlements, as squatter settlements are sometimes called. One estimate put the number of squatters in Singapore in the 1960's at 35 per cent ([Yuen, 2007](#)). The squatters and others living in run down housing or *Kampung*s, were totally rehoused by the turn of the century. Hong Kong, with its elaborate clearance, relocation and resale of land process, has rehoused all but about 200,000 squatters in the outer areas of New Territories and in some scattered sites on Kong Island and the Kowloon Peninsula ([Smart, 2002](#)). Kuala Lumpur, the Federal District in Malaysia, as well as the extended Klang Valley metropolitan area, have some of the aboriginal people and some paralegal *Kampung*s still scattered around the area, but have, for the most part, been rehoused and/or relocated. All three of these cities have provided housing for squatters and members of the informal communities in the absence of conflicting elites and highly mobilized squatter organizations.

Jakarta, Manila and Bangkok, with divided elites and highly mobilized squatter organizations with access to resources, today continue to have a large number of squatters in their metropolitan populations. Jakarta had an estimated 22 per cent squatter and/or informal population in the 1960s ([Grigg, 1989](#)). The number of squatters increased as the population of the metropolitan area of Jakarta expanded until some 20–25 per cent occupied squatter villages with another 4–5 per cent scattered about on vacant land ([McCarthy, n.d.; McCarthy, 2003](#)). Many squatter villages have emerged in the greater Jakarta area as well ([Peresthu, n.d.](#)). The population in Manila in 1970 was estimated to have some 50 per cent squatters, i.e., people living in households with no formal title or claim to the land ([McCarthy, 2003](#)). Population estimates based upon the 2007 Census of the Population gave a figure of 550,771 households of squatters ([IIED, 1989; Cruz, 2010](#)). An article in [pinoymoneytalk.com](#) puts the figure at 21 per cent of the Metro population ([Pinoymoneytalk, 2009; Pinoymoneytalk, 2014](#)).

Bangkok, Thailand has also expanded as a metropolitan area.

Figures for the earlier period of the 1960s in Bangkok estimate the squatter population at about one-half million people, or 24 per cent of the 2.15 million population ([Nadkarny & Anderson, n.d.](#)). By 2014, there were various estimates from 20 per cent ([Sapsuwan, 2014](#)), to 30 per cent by the managers of the Baanan Maankong project at CODI (personal communication, 2015).

Therefore, the predicted outcome of the earlier reports on the extent of the squatter population in each of these cities, and the expectation that divided elites and squatter organizational mobilization would win a place in the city by these groups, did not occur. In fact, the situation is the reverse. United elites and low or non-existent mobilization was characteristic of cities which integrated squatters and members of informal settlements into their life through adequate housing. What, then, explains this unanticipated outcome?

2. Squatter organization, mobilization and collective action in Southeast Asian metropolitan areas, 1960's to 2015

Squatters in the six megacities under consideration here went through a lot of changes in the last several decades. Each of the cities is described below, first by extended quotations from the earlier published analysis. Then by descriptions of policy and other changes up to the present time. The varying outcomes for squatters are presented as case studies. The main conclusion to be drawn in terms of outcomes, is that disunified elites and highly mobilized squatter communities do not result in a win for squatters. On the contrary.

2.1. Manila

Aldrich reports in earlier research that the Philippines has a disunified elite structure ([1990, p. 77](#)). Ironically, Manila, the megacity with the highest level of mobilization of squatters and slum dwellers, is also the one in which there is at present an estimated twenty-one percent squatters and high levels of continuing collective action. Forced relocations in the 1960's, with large numbers of squatters removed under the guns of the Philippine Army to *Sapang Pelay*, an undeveloped site more than 20 km from the job market of downtown Manila, created the extensive organization of informal communities. The Philippine Catholic Church took the side of the squatters and provided organization from the barrio up. There were strong imports from the U.S. in the form of Alinsky-type organizers. The power these organizations generated gave them influence over President Marcos when he ruled by martial law. The same widespread organization, in the form of "People Power", drove him from office. Subsequent attempts to provide housing for this very substantial portion of the urban population have failed ([Aldrich, 1991, p. 68](#)).

The large numbers of squatters in the 1960s is described by: "The squatters of Manila have taken over every little bit of land, park, space along the river, under bridges or any place else which provides enough space to put up a small hut. On a sliding scale, Manila appears to be at the top of the chart. One estimate is that over one-half of the metropolitan area is comprised of squatters" ([Aldrich, 1990, p. 77](#)).

The Manila metropolitan area is an "open city". It is surrounded by hundreds of square miles of wet rice cultivation. These areas have a very dense, and often redundant, population. There are no restrictions on moving to a city from the countryside as there has been in China and in Indonesia or under the former colonial governments. The conglomerates continue to expand the limits of the Manila conurbation, filling the landscape with new towns, shopping malls and other new structures. The squatters, along with the urban poor, continue to work the factories of the conglomerates

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