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POLITICAL STABILITY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: Democracy Doubts

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Source: *The World Today*, Vol. 66, No. 7 (July 2010), pp. 19-21

Published by: Royal Institute of International Affairs

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41962547>

Accessed: 24-07-2018 13:38 UTC

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# Democracy Doubts

The rise of China and the international financial crisis could be reducing interest in democracy as a solution to Southeast Asia's problems of political stability. Divisions still run deep in Thailand despite the violent dispersal of the latest protests. There are democracy doubts too in the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia. Singaporean leaders have never been believers.

**t**HE VIOLENT END TO THE STREET protests that disrupted Bangkok for two months raises questions about the political stability not only of Thailand, but of Southeast Asia more generally. The issues that the United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), or 'red shirts', raised about the legitimacy of the current Democrat Party led, coalition government of Oxford educated Abhisit Vejjajiva remain unresolved.

In fact, the recent demonstrations are just one particularly violent act in a slow moving Thai drama that began with the September 2006 military coup that toppled the democratically elected, but authoritarian, government of Thaksin Shinawatra. The

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monarchy, the Bangkok elite and the urban middle class that supported the coup and the current Abhisit government have since struggled to justify their hold on power.

In particular, the peasant farmers from the north, who form the backbone of Thaksin's red shirted support, no longer accept their traditionally determined political subordination. The Bangkok elites respond to this uncharacteristic lack of deference with the traditional remedy of repression. There is little prospect for reconciliation as cleavages deepen between the elite and the mass, rural and urban.

Thailand's inability to sustain a stable democracy dramatically crystallises an evolving pattern of political uncertainty across Southeast Asia. Despite the setback of the 1997 financial crisis, the core Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) economies: Singapore; Malaysia; Philippines; Indonesia and Thailand, have achieved rapid export-oriented growth over four decades. Post-Communist states like Vietnam and Cambodia can also boast significant economic development since embracing the market in the 1990s.

But ruling elites resist any transition from authoritarian, single party or military rule – with opaque government-business links and graft ridden bureaucracies – to a more open, multiparty, pluralist democracy.

Indeed, despite emerging relatively unscathed from the global financial crisis, running budget surpluses, and growing at rates that make Club Med Europeans faint with envy, these economies appear unable to escape from a middle income trap. Southeast Asia has not ascended the technology ladder and gross domestic product remains inequitably distributed between rich and poor, rural and urban.

VIOLENCE AND VOTE-BUYING

Ironically, where these middle income economies have democratised, elite pilfering and the gap between rich and poor have either increased or become more visible. In Thailand this has led to violence and political breakdown. But elsewhere the supposedly vibrant democracies of Indonesia and the Philippines are far from untroubled.

In Manila, the election of Benigno 'Noynoy' Aquino, son of former President Corry Aquino, ended the troubled incumbency of Gloria Arroyo. But it hardly marked the end of dynastic politics. An entrenched plutocratic

elite of forty families controls the political process. Democracy Philippine style is consequently a bizarre amalgam of vote buying and celebrity soap stars posing as populist politicians.

Nor is the electoral process violence free. In the province of Manguinabo the Arroyo linked Ampatuan clan sought to reinforce its local dominance by murdering political opponents. Fifty-seven people died in last November's Manguinabo Massacre, including thirty reporters.

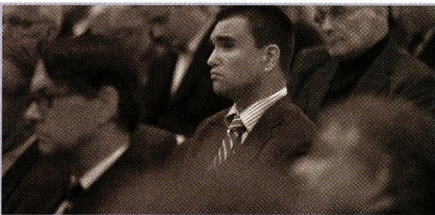
Despite inaugurating People Power in the region in 1987, the economy languishes and relies on remittances from Filipinos working overseas. In the 1950s international agencies put the Philippines economy on a par with Japan. Such a comparison now seems surreal. Transparency International recently ranked the Philippines below Pakistan and Liberia.



CRONYISM AND CORRUPTION

Elsewhere, Indonesia's democratic transformation since the fall of the kleptocratic Suharto regime in 1998 has also run out of steam. Susilo Bambang Yudoyono's second five year term as President of the world's largest Muslim democracy has become beset by the endemic regional disease of cronyism and corruption. Regional autonomy and a

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parliament at odds with the president has only exacerbated the problem.

Transparency International ranks Indonesia one of the world's most graft-ridden states. Parliament, the bureaucracy and the police are the worst offenders. In May the highly respected Finance Minister Sri Mulanyi Indrawati resigned to take up a post at the World Bank. Having done much to open the economy and expand the local tax base, she alienated business conglomerates by promoting greater accountability. She apparently particularly offended the Bakrie Group whose chief executive officer Aburizal Bakrie also sits in the cabinet and wields increasing influence.

Jakarta street demonstrations, featuring a water buffalo as an unflattering representation of the President, vividly depict growing popular dissatisfaction with his policy direction. The elite response has been predictable: the police have banned animals from demonstrations.

Somewhat differently, in Malaysia the ruling United Malay National Organization (UMNO) coalition maintains its hold on federal power, which it has monopolised since independence, despite its worst general election result in 2008.

The subsequent replacement of former Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi with the more assertive Najib Razak has revived the faltering coalition. Razak has introduced a new economic model that seeks to reduce subsidies to the Malay majority and make UMNO-linked businesses more accountable.

But opposition controlled state governments in the federation have revealed a number of questionable business-government deals suggesting that there is little difference between one party and multiparty states when it comes to cronyism.

Meanwhile tension between the dominant Malay majority and the politically excluded Chinese and Indian minorities makes Razak's ideal of a united Malaysia difficult to fulfil. And the UMNO elite, the state controlled media and judiciary continue to pursue former UMNO deputy Prime Minister and opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim for the alleged sodomy of a former aide.

## DYSFUNCTIONAL

Democracy is on hold across the region. It is not surprising to find, therefore, that Singapore, ASEAN's most successful economy, and the only one to escape the middle income trap, considers democracy dysfunctional. The single party, technologically guided regime prefers, as Premier Lee Hsien Loong observes,

administrative efficiency to 'malfunctioning democracy with troubled economies, polarised politics and widespread corruption'.

It is increasingly apparent that the middle class beneficiaries of regional growth and development consider the experience of democracy unsatisfactory. Indeed, the urban middle classes have proved something of a disappointment for democracy advocates. Although attracted to greater openness, they are the creation of authoritarian rule and remain profoundly conservative, as the coup in Thailand and their support for single party rule in Malaysia and Singapore demonstrates.

Protests in Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia in the last two years reveal that it is not the middle classes who disturb regional elites by taking to the streets to resist their arbitrary rule, but ordinary people. These uprisings are dramatic and televisual but fail to bring about long term institutional change, or fundamentally alter elite behaviour. As a result Southeast Asian states possess all the appearances of democracy – parliaments, judiciaries, and multimedia hubs – but lack institutional substance. Ultimately they remain imitation democracies.

At the same time the conduct of the 'war' on terror, the success of Chinese style authoritarian capitalism and relative US decline, have diminished any external western pressure to reform.

In the 1990s, incentives to democratisation might have appealed to an emerging generation of western educated technocrats as no alternative to liberal democracy seemed in sight. Vainly, it seemed, ageing Asian authoritarians like Malaysia's Mahathir Mohamad or Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew railed against western soft power and middle class demands for greater freedom. But the inexorable connection between markets, modernisation and democratic freedoms now seems somewhat passé.

Singaporeans can now enjoy table dancing in Clarke Quay, the odd risqué night club or even a casino without forfeiting the technocratic guidance of the People's Action Party or abandoning Asian values. Meanwhile, the recent impact of what Australian reserve bank governor, Glen Stevens, terms the 'northern' financial crisis means that transatlantic values of openness, the rule of law, light touch regulation and pluralism are suddenly less appealing. All they seem to generate is unsustainable debt. The region meanwhile looks to China for growth and investment opportunities. China, in return, places no democratic constraints on the region's elites.

