Indian Council
of World Affairs

SAPRU HOUSE PAPER

DEMOCRACY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Emerging Trends and Factors Shaping the Transitions

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ISBN:

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ABSTRACT

The paper is a study on the nature and progress of democratic reforms in Southeast Asian countries since the mid-1980s. While successful democratic transition is being witnessed in some of these countries, there has also been democratic backsliding and the return of strongman politics in some others. The paper examines the emerging political trends in seven Southeast Asian countries, and how their democratic process is being shaped by key internal and external factors.

Keywords: Democracy, Southeast Asia, Socio-Economic Security, Politics, Elections.

INTRODUCTION

The 'People Power movement' in the Philippines in 1986 which ended Marcos's twenty years rule was hailed around the world as an example of peaceful revolution and the restoration of democracy. This was followed by wider democratic trends across Southeast Asia which included the 1991 Paris Comprehensive Peace Settlement which ended Cambodia's civil war and elections being held in May 1993; the landmark 1997 Constitution in Thailand; and the adoption of reformasi (democratic reform process) by Indonesia from 1998.[1] These were major departures which changed the political landscape of Southeast Asia which until then had been, marked by 'strongmen' rule such as Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore, Mahathir bin Mohamad in Malaysia and Sukarno followed by Suharto in Indonesia.[2]

At the turn of the 21st century, one of the most dramatic political transformations took place in Myanmar, which in 2010 witnessed the inauguration of its first civilian government in half a century. This was however, followed by the return of a military government through a coup in February 1, 2021.[3] Over the decades countries in Southeast Asia which were part of the democratic transitions, have witnessed a deepening trend towards a system of political

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The paper is a study on the process of democratic reforms in seven countries in Southeast Asia – Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Given that all the seven countries are not homogeneous and rather very unique in terms of their political systems and its evolution, the paper examines them individually. By examining the emerging political trends, the paper analyses some of the key internal and external factors that are shaping the nature of democratic transition in these countries.

POLITICAL TRANSITIONS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Southeast Asia today comprises of a wide array of political systems that range from democracies such as Indonesia, the Philippines, to Communist States such as Laos and Vietnam, to the absolute monarchy of Brunei. In studying the evolving democratic transitions, multiple factors continue to play a role in the individual countries. This section focuses on the political trajectory of the seven countries in Southeast Asia which has been a part of the democratic transition process.

CAMBODIA

The period between 1985 and 1991 saw continued civil war in Cambodia, led by the Khmer Rouge. This period also witnessed the transition to a State of Cambodia and the opening up of its economy in 1989. The Paris Peace Accord was signed on October 23, 1991, between the leaders of the four Cambodian factions – Khmer Rouge, Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party (BLDP), Cambodian People's Party (CPP), and National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC) – and the permanent five members of the UN Security Council and 12 other states. The Peace Accord also provided for the establishment of a United National Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). The UNTAC was entrusted with the task of demobilising, disarming, and supervising the armed troops of the of the four factions, enforcing the ceasefire and arms embargo, administering key aspects of government (defence, foreign affairs, public security, finance and information) until the

holding of elections in 1993 and ensuring the observance of human rights. Further, a Supreme National Council (SNC) was established for the transitional period and act as a neutral central authority, with Prince Norodom Sihanouk as its President. The SNC had 12 members of which six were from the CPP, two from the Funcinpec, two from the BLDP, and two from the Khmer Rouge. The UNTAC came to Cambodia in 1992 to implement the mandated tasks under the leadership of Yasuski Akashi. It succeeded in holding the election but could not fulfil the task of demobilising and disarming all the factions. The election for the Constituent Assembly, which was converted to the National Assembly, was held in May 1993 in which 90 percent of the registered voters participated in the poll.[4]

The royalist FUNCINPEC Party received 45 percent of the votes, the CPP 38 percent, and the BLDP four percent. As none of the parties' got absolute majority in the house of 120, a coalition government was formed jointly, led by Prince Norodom Ranariddh as first Prime Minister (PM) and Hun Sen as second PM. The National Assembly which adopted a liberal democratic institution and approved the formation of a new coalition government was made up of four political parties – Khmer Rouge, BLDP, CPP, and FUNCINPEC. The new coalition government with two heads had its defects and flaws, but was perhaps the best the country could get under the circumstances at the time. The arrangement overcame the CPP threat of territorial secession and maintained political stability, at least until the mid-1990s.[5] Norodom Sihanouk was declared as the head of the state who signed the new constitution on September 24, 1993, after it was ratified by the Constituent Assembly. The Cambodian Constitution has 139 articles, which defines separation

Cambodian democracy remains largely unconsolidated within the electoral realm; the CPP under the leadership of Hun Sen worked its way to consolidate power.

of powers into legislative, executive, and judicial sections and enumerates a long list of human rights. The Constitution has provided for a system of constitutional monarchy, according to which the King shall rule according to the Constitution. The Constitution listed the principles of liberal democracy, pluralism and for the country to permanently remain neutral and non-aligned. Further, the King was to be chosen by the "Royal Council of the Throne" which consisted of the President of the National Assembly, the PM, the first and second Vice-President of National Assembly and also Somdech the Chief of the Orders of Mahanikaya and Thammayut. The King is not empowered to appoint heir to the throne and will continue to remain the constitutional head only. The legislature is unicameral with the National Assembly comprising of 120 members and being the sole body to formulate and review rules and regulations.[6]

Despite these new developments, Cambodian democracy remains largely unconsolidated within the electoral realm; the CPP under the leadership of Hun Sen worked its way to consolidate power. Hun Sen first sought to personalise rather than institutionalise power by working with Prince Norodom Ranariddh in their joint attempt to weaken the other coalition partners. As the political opposition weakened, Hun Sen began to adopt the next strategy to weaken the FUNCINPEC. The process of democratisation finally broke down when Hun Sen staged a violent coup in July 1997,

While political stability increased with regular elections taking place, democracy seems to have given way to autocratic politics.

ousting his main coalition partner Prince Ranariddh. After Prince Ranariddh was ousted a new First PM, Ung Huot from FUNCINPEC was installed, however Hun Sen became the man in charge. While political stability increased with regular elections taking place, democracy seems to have given way to autocratic politics. The CPP also kept gaining more seats at successive elections moving Cambodia towards a hegemonic party system.[7] In the last general elections held in July 2018, the CPP won all 125 seats in the National Assembly, as a consequence of the only viable opposition party the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), being disbanded by an arbitrary Supreme Court ruling.[8] While Cambodia continues to hold regular elections with July 23, 2023, being set for the seventh National Assembly election[9], some observers argue that the nature of its political system has become more repressive with the rise of a single dominant party.

INDONESIA

Indonesia has emerged as a dominant regional power in ASEAN, and an important player in East Asia and the Pacific. Ever since it proclaimed its independence in 1945, its leader Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta favoured democracy as a system of government. The country's 1945 constitution provided for a unitary state in the form of a Republic, and while it titled towards the executive, it also honoured some important basic tenets of democracy. Its preamble emphasised humanitarianism, consultation, and social

Under Sukarno and Suharto, there has been emphasis on non-religious nature of the State and its policies in adherence to the five principles or Pancasila in which 'belief in one God' is one of the five principles

justice. Under the constitution, sovereignty rested in the hands of the people, to be represented by both the People's Representative Council (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat/DPR) and the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR). In addition, the constitution stipulated the principles of majority rule, separation of powers, and freedom of religion.[10] Indonesia being the largest Muslim nation in the world, one would assume a close linkage between Islam and politics. Sukarno made the argument that if the new state was based on 'belief in God' then it would be neither an Islamic, nor a secular state but a 'religious' state. Therefore, all religions, including Islam, in Indonesia are free to practice their religious obligations.[11] This emphasis by its founding father enabled Indonesia right from its inception as a Republic to strike a balance between religion and the state. While some sections of Indonesians want the implementation of Islamic shari'ah, the government since the time of Sukarno has been consistently practicing secularism in term of their governance. Under Sukarno and Suharto, there has been emphasis on non-religious nature of the State and its policies in adherence to the five principles or Pancasila in which 'belief in one God' is one of the five principles.[12]

One of the five principles of the state ideology of Pancasila included democratic representation which was strengthened by the plan to hold general elections in January 1946. The government, through

With the aim to create stability rather than deepen democracy under Suharto, political competition was discouraged and embraced liberal economic policy.

the issue of Declaration X in 1945, encouraged the public to form political parties. Unfortunately, the elections could not take place as Indonesia's independence was threatened by the Dutch colonialism; a struggle that ended only in December 1949 when its sovereignty was recognised by the Netherlands. Indonesia held its general elections on September 29 and December 15, 1955, in which 34 political parties and individual candidates contested for the DPR and MPR. Although the elections were free and fair, till March 1957 neither the government nor the Constituent Assembly performed well. There were at least eight cabinet or government changes as government had to deal with issues of national unity rather than focus on the social, economic, and political problems faced by the young Republic. Under Sukarno's Guided Democracy (1957-65), in 1959 decrees were issued that established Pancasila as the state ideology, re-established the 1945 Constitution and the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly. The 1945 Constitution had established strong executive powers that led to the emergence of Sukarno and the military as the dominant players in Indonesia. Sukarno's rule ended with a military coup on September 30, 1965, under the leadership of Major General Suharto. Suharto's New Order (1966-1998), government rejected both the Liberal Democracy (1950-57) and Guided Democracy (1957-66). With the aim to create stability rather than deepen democracy under Suharto, political competition was discouraged and embraced liberal economic policy. To obscure

its authoritarian nature, the New Order government regularly conducted parliamentary elections in 1971, 1977, 1982, 1987, 1992, and 1997; in which the government's party, Golkar, always won the elections. There was growing discontentment within and outside Indonesia, which saw Suharto's government just as authoritarian as the Sukarno government it had replaced. Further, the Asian financial crisis had a huge impact on the economy of Indonesia which contracted by 18 percent that revealed the country's social, political, and economic problems and forcing Suharto to resign on May 21, 1998, and handing over power to his Vice President Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie.[13]

During the Suharto government, five political laws were introduced in 1985. These laws, widely regarded as the legal cornerstone of the New Order, made it impossible for any opposition party to win power. The fall of Suharto and the installation of the interim government under President Habibie, on May 21, 1998, were marked by strong pressure from the reformasi movement for a speedy election. President Habibie made it a priority to revise the 1985 political laws in order to ensure a more acceptable system of elections and representations could be accommodated within the existing 1945 Constitution.[14] He promised to amend the constitution after the election, to devolve power from central government to the regions and even to give autonomy to conflict regions such as Papua, Aceh and East Timor (East Timor finally seceded from Indonesia in 1999). The Habibie government also advanced the adoption of direct presidential election, instead of the previous system of appointment by the high state institution

The *reformasi* movement resulted in significant amendments to the Constitution, which impacted all three branches of government, added important human rights provisions and for the first time inserted the concept of 'election' into the constitution

at that time, the People's Consultative Assembly or MPR, two thirds of whose members were in the DPR.[15]

The *reformasi* movement resulted in significant amendments to the Constitution, which impacted all three branches of government, added important human rights provisions and for the first time inserted the concept of 'election' into the constitution.[16] With the three political laws concerning political parties, general elections and the composition of parliament, getting ratified by the Indonesian parliament on January 28, 1999, it paved the way for the conduct of elections on June 7, 1999. The Indonesian parliament consists of the DPR and the Regional Representative Council (Dewan Perwakilan Daerah/DPD), both are elected for a five-year term. While the DPR is an existing body established by the 1945 Constitution, the DPD was formed in 2001 through an amendment to the Constitution in a move towards bicameralism. The DPR has a total of 560 representatives while the DPD has 132 representatives.[17]

In June 1999, Parliamentary elections were held in which Indonesia's Democratic Party of Struggle won 33 percent, Golkar 22 percent, and National Awakening Party 12 percent; and Abdurrahman Wahid becoming the fourth president of Indonesia. The MPR in July 2002 completed major reforms of the 1945 constitution which made way for a directly elected presidency

and removed all appointed seats from Parliament. The first direct elections of the president and regional leaders (governors and mayors/ regents) were held in 2004 and 2005 respectively. President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was directly elected after defeating the incumbent Megawati in a direct presidential election for the term 2004–09 and even successfully continued his second and final term presidency in 2009–14.[18] Although Indonesia was peaceful for much of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's presidential term (2004–2014), his administration was plagued by corruption and scandals, which led to widespread disillusionment with the government. This disillusionment played a role in the 2014 election of Joko Widodo (popularly known as Jokowi), the former governor of Jakarta, as Indonesia's president. Although Jokowi clearly defeated former general Prabowo Subianto, the election was deeply divisive, with Prabowo alleging massive voter fraud.[19]

The 1945 constitution was also amended to make the once powerful, party-centred Presidency subject to popular election and also limited it to a two five-year terms. The Presidential nomination for the election is determined by the candidates demonstrating support from parties in the DPR. A candidate team for the President and Vice-President needs to show they have the support of parties commanding at least 20 percent of seats in the current DPR or 25 percent of the votes their parties secured in the last election. To win the Presidential election the candidate must secure over 50 percent of the popular vote. If no candidate secures 50 percent of the vote in the first round then the top two candidate pairs face off in a second round.[20] At the April 2019 National Elections, voters for the very first time elected members to the DPR, DPD and Regional

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Legislative Council (DPRD) members concurrently along with the President and Vice President.[21] Mr Joko Widodo took oath of the office of the President of Indonesia for the second time on October 20, 2019, after winning 55.5 percent of the votes as compared to 44.5 percent received by his rival Mr Prabowo Subianto.[22][22]

In the *Konstituante* (Constitutional Assembly) debates of 1955-57 and in the Constitutional debates at the beginning of the democratic transition in 1999-2001, the idea that Indonesia is a home for many religions were embedded constitutionally and broadly accepted. Further, Indonesia's largest Islamic civil society organisations continued to play a constructive role in fostering the pro-democratic attitudes and movements that enabled the consolidation of the Republic.[23] As Indonesia continues with its democratic consolidation concerns about the future of it becoming an Islamic state and imposing shari'ah on its citizen's remains. In this new phase of Indonesia's democratic transition, there seems to be a continuing cultural revival of Islam in Indonesia.[24]

MALAYSIA

Malaysia is derived from the term 'Malay' in recognition of the Malay-speaking people that dominated the peninsula. The individual Malay states in the nineteenth and early twentieth century came under the British colonial rule till they achieved their independence in 1957. Tunku Abdul Rahman who was the

former and first Chief Minister of the Federation of Malay in May 1961, proposed the federation of the existing Federation of Malay with Singapore (still than a British colony) and the three British-controlled territories in northern Borneo – Sarawak, Sabah, and Brunei – to form a united 'Malaysia'. The Federation of Malaysia was established on September 16, 1963, that brought together the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, and the British-ruled protectorate of Sarawak and Sabah in northern Borneo. The state of Brunei situated between British North Borneo and Sarawak, declined to join Malaysia, while in 1965 Singapore was expelled from the federation.[25]

The establishment of the new federation of Malaysia impacted the internal political balance that wanted to protect the dominance of the indigenous Muslim community of the Malay Peninsula. This was also one of the reasons for the expulsion of Singapore from the federation which had a large economically stronger ethnic Chinese of migrant origin and would have impacted the electoral demography. Therefore, when Singapore's ruling People's Action Party (PAP) entered the Malaysian elections in 1964 to challenge the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), it was seen as a challenge to the Malay-Muslim political dominance and this laid the ground for its expulsion from the federation. The Malay-Muslim political dominance in the federation is also symbolised in a constitutional monarchy whose incumbent is drawn, on a rotating five-year basis, from the sultans or rulers of the States of Malay Peninsula. The initiative for establishing a united federation of Malaysia by its first PM Tunku Abdul Rahman was in a way for securing the dominant political position of the Malay community

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represented by his political party the UMNO led by him. The model of Malaysian politics has been based on inter-communal coalition government led by its Muslim component. The UMNO which remained the dominant party was compelled to reinforce its Islamic identity to help overcome political vulnerabilities which arose as a consequent of its close cooperation with the other non-Malay parties that were part of the ruling coalition.[26]

The Malaysian government embodies both democratic and authoritarian features and has been described as 'quasi-democratic', 'illiberal democracy', 'statist democratic', 'repressive-responsive', 'illiberal democracy", and so on. The Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition – in which UMNO is the founding member – has been in power since Malaysia's independence with all the PMs being members of the UMNO. The dominance of the UMNO in the BN continued to remain significant to the extent that the other parties became essentially junior partners in the coalition. The political dominance became more entrenched under the leadership of PM Mahathir Mohamad. When Mahathir government came into power in 1981, he inherited a political system where the institutions and electoral system were already democratically weak and the executive branch already dominated the parliament, judiciary, and the media. Just like his predecessors, Mahathir could rely on an effective state machinery to maintain the authoritarian government through a repressive-responsive approach.[27] Further, under his administration Malaysia witnessing

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a strong economic growth that was supported through its diversification into export-led growth in manufacturing, oil and gas, and plantation agriculture. This helped reduce inter-ethnic conflicts and disputes that characterised Malaysian politics during the 1970s and 1980s and provided a strong material base for political stability in a plural society. Such stability also enabled a more authoritarian government that placed curbs on the role of independent institutions required to provide political checks and balances associated with parliamentary democracy. This increasing authoritarianism of the ruling coalition government provided opportunity for the main Malay opposition parity Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) to make considerable gains along with the rise of new political entities.[28]

The 12th General Elections in Malaysia held on March 8, 2008, saw the opposition parties winning 82 seats in the 222-seat Malaysian Parliament, thereby denying the BN the two-thirds majority along with it losing five state governments. The result highlighted the threat to UMNO's continued dominance in Malaysian politics as a significant one-third of Malay voters supported the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR, or Citizen's Coalition) coalition engineered by AnwarIbrahim.[29]

The result of the 14th General Election in Malaysia declared in May 2018 was a major surprise. The ruling BN coalition headed by the UMNO lost for the first time since Malaysia's independence. Dr Mahathir Mohamad led to victory the opposition coalition the Pakatan Harapan (PH) which was formed after the 2013 General elections. The PH comprised of the left and left-centred parties that included the People's Justice Party (PKR), the multi-racial Democratic Action Party (DAP), the progressive Islamic National Trust Party (AMANAH), and the racially exclusive Malaysian United Indigenous Party (PPBM or BERSATU).[30] Dr Mahathir, who was the Chairman of the PH, was appointed as the 7th Prime Minister of Malaysia while its President, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, was appointed the 12th Deputy PM of Malaysia. However, on February 24, 2020, Mahathir resigned as the PM and along with him his party the PPBM and the PKR withdrew from the PH; reducing the majority of the coalition in the Parliament.[31] This led to the formation of the Perikatan Nasional (PN) an alliance composed of the PPBM, Malaysian Islamic Party, Homeland Solidarity Party, Sabah Progressive Party, and Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia was established in February 2020. Its Chairman Muhyiddin Yassin was appointed as the 8th PM of Malaysia and while it did not have a majority in the Parliament it had outside support from the UMNO.[32]

Muhyiddin Yassin's tenure in office right from the start was on a shaky ground as the ruling coalition had a fragile majority in the Parliament. This often led to questions being raised on its legitimacy. Further, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic with deep impact on public-health and the subsequent economic crisis, felt across the country ensured the inevitability of a constitutional crisis. On July

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8, 2021, UMNO President Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, reflecting on the rising anger in the country on the handling of the government's pandemic response, stated that the party would retract its support and called for the installation of an interim PM.[33] After weeks of the opposition, mounting pressure and withdrawal of the support of eleven UMNO MPs from the government, on August 3, 2021, PM Yassin – in office for eighteen months – had to step down as the ruling PN coalition lost its majority. On August 16, 2021, PM Muhyiddin Yassin tendered his resignation to the Malaysian King, Sultan Abdullah Ahmad Shah.[34] After nearly a week of political chaos, on August 21, 2021, Mr Ismail Sabri Yaakob, Vice President of UMNO, was sworn in as Malaysia's 9th PM. Ismail Sabri Yaakob had the support of 114 MPs in the Parliament and while he led the PN coalition, like Muhyiddin Yassin his taking over as the PM also marked the UMNO party's return to power; three years after it had lost the general elections for the first time since the country's independence.[35]

MYANMAR

Amongst the countries of Southeast Asia where today there exist democracies along with communist states –which have also adapted to features of democracy in the post-Cold War period – Myanmar becomes an interesting study. Myanmar has undergone momentous changes in the last two decades from

Myanmar has undergone momentous changes in the last two decades from being under military dictatorship to the holding of free elections in November 2015 and the return of military rule in February 2021.

being under military dictatorship to the holding of free elections in November 2015 and the return of military rule in February 2021. Myanmar has been under military control directly when it was under martial law regimes from 1962-74, 1988-2011, and February 2021 till date; and indirectly through the military's chosen channel of control – the Burma Socialist Programme Party or BSPP (1974-1988). Ever since Myanmar's independence in 1948, the military's control remained strong with its profound influence over the civilian government (1948-1962). This also helped save the state from disintegration through political and ethnic rebellions where the military had direct administrative control of the country for eighteen months (1958-1960). The armed forces of Myanmar also called tatmadaw had low regard for the civilian politicians who saw them as being corrupt, inefficient, lacking developmental skills or foresight, unpatriotic, and capable of sacrificing the unity of the state to special ethnic or economic interests. Therefore, the military designed a set of system that would ensure for perpetuity of both - effective control over state power and its autonomy.[36]

Tatmadaw doctrine is similar to the doctrine of Dwifungsi (dual role of the armed forces) in Indonesia – which after the resignation of President Suharto in May 1998 was disbanded as the Indonesians preferred a parliamentary system. In Myanmar also tatmadaw doctrine is contentious with the National League for Democracy

(NLD) struggling to disband it and working towards the restoration of democracy. When General Ne Win resigned in the wake of student-led demonstration in 1988 and was succeeded by Maung Maung, the consensus was to abolish tatmadaw. However, Maung Maung who was declared by the People's Assembly as President and BSPP Chairman was not able to hold power and through a coup d'état staged by General Saw Maung, who assumed power in the name of State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). Under his leadership, general election was held on May 27, 1990. In the election, which was free and fair, democratic forces led by NLD got 392 seats out of 485 seats whereas the military's National Unity Party won 10 seats. The result indicated Myanmar's disapproval of the tatmadaw doctrine. However, despite the election results the SLORC did not allow civilian leaders to assume power and the military stayed on and called for a national convention to draw up the principles of the new constitution only after which new elections were to be held. The National Convention (NC) to frame a new constitution was convened by the military in 1993 in which there were 702 delegates.[37]

When the NC met on January 9, 1993, only 107 of the 702 delegates were representatives elected in the May 1990 election with 88 being from the NLD. Other invitees were minorities, peasants, workers, intelligentsia and technocrats, government officials, and other persons. Strict procedural rules were enforced to silent debates, making the NC a stalling device in order to dismantle independent political organisation and activity. By September 16, 1993, Chief Justice U Aung Toe presented 104 basic principles that were said to be based on 22 papers presented by eight groups

that would lay the foundation of the new constitution. The SLORC established the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) as a government-organised, non-governmental organisation on September 15, 1993.The NC was criticised as being undemocratic and authoritarian by Aung San Suu Kyi and eventually the NLD delegates were expelled on November 30, 1995. This action led to the NC being adjourned in March 1996 until 2004; which allowed the SLORC to continue its rule over Myanmar. The SLORC changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in November 1997, thereby suggesting that it had restored law and order and would hence forth work for peace and development. While they were reinforcing the military and supporting its political proxy USDA, they kept political dissidence minimal. The increasing international pressure including from neighbouring Southeast Asian countries in the 1990s and into the new century led the junta to announce a seven-step roadmap on August 30, 2003, through the reconvening of the NC with constitution making back on the agenda. The NC was concluded on September 3, 2007, with the adoption of Fundamental Principles and Detailed Basic Principles.[38]

The process of drafting the constitution, initiated in 1993 through the convening of the National Convention, was concluded in late 2007 and early 2008. In February 2008, the SPDC announced that the draft constitution would be put to a referendum on May 10 the same year. The Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar established a bicameral national parliament, known as the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, which comprised of440-seat Pyithu Hluttaw, or lower house, and 224-seat Amyotha

Hluttaw, or upper house. Additionally, fourteen State and Region Hluttaws were created. In all parliamentary bodies, the military is guaranteed 25 percent of seats, which are filled by serving military personnel appointed by the Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Services.[39] On November 7, 2010, the elections were held in Myanmar after an interval of twenty years. The NLD boycotted the elections on the grounds that the 2008 Constitution was undemocratic, and the expulsion of Aung San Suu Kyi from the party, under the Political Parties Registration Law released by SPDC in March 2010. The Union Election Commission (UEC) announced the results on November 18, in which the military backed USDP, won the elections. The major opposition and pro-democracy parties dismissed the election results and rejected in participating at the parliament.[40]

On March 30, 2011, a new government was inaugurated which was highly reminiscent of the previous military administrations in terms of its personnel, most of whom were retired tatmadaw members.[41] However, the new government also marked a departure with the end of the SPDC in 2011. Under the SPDC, there was no clear distinction between Myanmar's armed forces or tatmadaw and the central government since the military high command and executive leadership were one and the same. The transition to a semi-civilian regime post-2011; where former senior military officers, including top brass from the SPDC began to manage the new constitutional government. President Thein Sein who assumed office from 2011 through to 2016 was himself a fourth ranking officer in the SPDC, while Shwe Mann and Khin Aung Myint, who served the transitional government in pivotal roles as

speakers of the Union Assembly, were also top commanders during the military regime. During the transitional years (2011-2016) much effort were towards rehabilitating Myanmar's international image by taking steps that included welcoming the NLD into the formal political arrangement, hosting the Southeast Asian Games, and undertaking the chairmanship of ASEAN in 2014 for the first time. The ASEAN and East Asia Summits held in 2014 was an opportunity for the government to showcase the increasing vibrancy of the society of Myanmar.[42]

In the transition period, Myanmar did witness transformation with dramatic increase in the number of political actors, a gradual diffusion of power within a multi-layered system of government, and restrictions being eased on political, economic, and civil society.[43] From the onset, Myanmar's transition from deep authoritarianism had its limitations given the retention of its military in government. While a Constitutional Review Joint Committee was established to consider revision to the 2008 Constitution the recommendation unveiled on January 31, 2014, fell short of expectations with the only significant proposed change being the creation of a more equitable power-sharing arrangement between the central government and its ethnic-minority-controlled governments.[44]

Under the military-authored constitution, a quarter of the seats in the national legislature were reserved for military-appointed

From the onset, Myanmar's transition from deep authoritarianism had its limitations given the retention of its military in government.

representatives, who generally voted as a bloc. This required the NLD to win two-thirds of the elected seats to achieve a governing majority. Further, the military by having veto power on matters relating to constitutional change made it almost impossible to bring about substantial political reforms. This included Aung San Suu Kyi being disqualified from being elected as President of Myanmar as it involved changing Myanmar's constitution which states 'not owe allegiance to a foreign power, not be a subject of a foreign power or citizen of a foreign country'. Given that Suu Kyi's late husband Michael Aris was British and her two children also hold British nationality, the Constitutionbarred her election to the Presidency.[45]

On November 8, 2015, Myanmar held its first general election under the 2008 constitution in which all main political parties including the NLD participated. In total, 91 political parties contested the election the two largest being the NLD and the USDP. According to figures published by the UEC, over 69 percent of Myanmar's 34.3 million eligible voters casted their ballots during the November 2015 general elections. Elections were held across all 14 states and regions, with the exception of seven townships in Shan state and approximately 416 wards and village tracts in Bago region, Kachin, Kayin, and Mon, where voting was cancelled because of security concerns. The NLD emerged as the biggest winner in the elections, taking more than 79 percent of the elected seats in the upper and lower houses and a majority of seats in 10 of the 14 states and regional assemblies. The USDP won 8 percent of elected seats in the upper and lower houses. With the exception of the National Unity Party, which won a seat in the upper House, non-ethnic

national parties did not win seats in the national legislature, including those that had held seats in the previous legislatures, such as the National Democratic Force.[46]

On April 6, 2016, the post of the State Counsellor of Myanmar which is equivalent to a PM was created to allow for a greater role for Aung San Suu Kyi. The new Myanmar government remained constrained by the 2008 constitution, which gave power to the military. During her first term as State Counsellor, Suu Kyi sought to broker a new nationwide peace agreement with the various ethnic minority armed groups. However, not much was achieved as the well-armed militias were unwilling to accept her government's claims on their territories.[47] Further, Aung San Suu Kyi also faced international backlash by her refusal to speak out against both the brutal violence against the Rohingya Muslims minority in Rakhine and the jailing of two Reuters' journalists Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, for their exposure of the military's brutal actions. While Suu Kyi was not responsible for the military crackdown that occurred in Rakhine state in August 2017, however by not condemning and propagating that the actions were an appropriate response to the militia uprisingraised questions on the progress of democracy in Myanmar.[48]

Electoral problems included discriminatory citizenship and other laws that barred most Rohingya Muslim voters and candidates; reservation of 25 percent of parliamentary seats for the military; criminal prosecutions of government critics; unequal party access to government media; and the lack of an independent election commission and complaints resolution mechanism.[49] In the lead-up to the 2020 General election, the commander-in-chief of the

military, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, released a statement criticising the Election Commission, arguing that 'weakness and deficiencies which were never seen in the previous elections are appearing'. There were also the restrictions being imposed on freedom of speech, internet shutdowns, and campaign restrictions due to COVID-19.[50]

In the 2020 election, the NLD won 920 (or 82 percent) of the total 1,117 elected seats up for grabs nationwide, while the military-backed main opposition party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party, winning 71 seats, or 6.4 percent of elected seats. Following the general election in which NLD won a landslide the military seized control on February 1, 2021, with Suu Kyi and other leaders of the party being detained. While international observers like the Carter Center and local monitoring groups said the polls were free and fair, according to the military the poll was "not free and fair" and "not in compliance with" the constitution and the law. A review of the election irregularities was order by coup leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. After nearly six-month-long investigation by the UEC of voter lists and ballot papers in the country's 315 townships, it found more than 11 million irregularities in the voter lists, such as the inclusion of people who didnot have national ID cards as well as vote duplication, with the same ID card numbers appearing on multiple sets of ballots.[51] The coup in Myanmar has ended a decade of its democratic reform

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with the country becoming isolated and sanctions being imposed on it by the West. With the extension of the emergency rule being imposed for another six months on August 1, 2022, the holding of new elections in August 2023 becomes more uncertain with opponents' not sure that even if it does take place whether it would be free and fair.[52]

THE PHILIPPINES

The Republic of the Philippines was established as an independent state on July 4, 1946, when sovereignty was transferred by the US colonial administration. On independence, the Philippines replicated the US constitutional model with an elected presidential system of government constrained in principle by congressional and judicial checks and balances. Manuel Roxas became the first President of the Republic of the Philippines in July 1946 after the full transfer of sovereignty.[53] The country struggled to grow economically with the US rehabilitation assistance in reciprocity for Filipino loyalty during the war, being far less than the money given for rebuilding Japan. Further, the US aid was also tied to neo-colonial concessions, including a rigid currency link of peso to dollar and special privileges for American corporation and individuals. The US also insisted on retaining its military bases for ninety-nine years, including the fleet harbour in Subic Bay and Clark Air Base – in which the Philippine law did not apply to American troops. The first twenty years of Philippines independence saw the nation witnessing economic challenges along with major political leadership vacuum. These conditions enabled the rise of Ferdinand Marcos an ambitious young

senator from northern Luzon, to win the Presidential elections in 1965 and become one of the most powerful political figures in the post-independence history of the Philippines. The advent of authoritarian rule under Marcos was established when martial law was declared in September 1972, before the end of his second term and not surrendering power after two full terms as provided in the constitution of 1935.[54]

The imposition of martial rule in order to overcome the constitutional limitation of two presidential terms, helped neutralise Marcos political rivals such as Benigno Aquino a young opposition Senator. Aquino and a number of other leading opposition politicians were imprisoned under the martial rule, and Marcos confiscated businesses from several oligarchs. These actions compelled other politicians and businessmen to collaborate with Marcos rather than try to oppose his authoritarian rule. Under Marcos, the Philippines' economy began to grow as exports increased, foreign investment was encouraged and initiatives such as massive infrastructure drive were undertaken for accelerating industrialisation. In order to pay for these ambitious projects, Marcos borrowed from the international markets leading to the country's foreign debt rising from US$ 3.8 billion in 1975 to US$ 12.7 billion in 1980. The adverse economic factors were further precipitated by the energy crisis. The economic mismanagement along with the increasing abuse of power by the administration led to disillusionment against the political and legal institutions forcing the ending of the martial law in January 1981. The assassination of opposition leader Benigo Aquino in August 1983 at the Manila Airport, led to a full-scale financial meltdown after

it was revealed that the Central Bank had falsified the country's financial records. This led to massive capital flight and caused the peso to plummet causing high inflation, forcing the government to ask for a debt moratorium with its debt increasing to US$ 25 billion. The government was forced to accept an International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity programme in exchange for a bailout leading to a severe economic contraction, and its GDP declining by 15 percent in just two years.[55]

President Marcos, under pressure from the US and the country's continued economic woes called for a snap election in February 1986 in which he was challenged by Corazon Aquino the widow of Benigo Aquino. Marcos claimed victory in the elections; however, the Filipinos refused to accept this lie. On February 22, hundreds of thousands of Filipinos took to the streets on Epifanio de los Santos Avenue to protest against President Marcos and his claim that he won re-elections over Corazon Aquino. Cardinal Jaime Sin, the Archbishop of Manila, called upon Filipinos to support the peaceful protests known as the People Power movement. Corazon Aquino was declared winner of the election with Marcos and his wife being forced to leave the country on February 25 for exile in Hawaii.[56]

President Aquino initiated the restoration of a legitimate constitutional structure with the US model being reinstated in slightly modified form with a bicameral congress but with provision for a single presidential term of six years. This new constitution was approved with an overwhelming vote in favour in a national referendum held in February 1987. Carazon Aquino completed her full tenure under the new constitution and was

Democratisation and its ultimate success place a high premium on the extent to which the socio-economic conditions of the people are addressed. In this context, the Philippines suffering from high poverty levels along with weakness in its job market provides little avenue for a more stable macroeconomic situation; causing vulnerabilities to its existing democracy.

succeeded by Fidel Ramos who won the elections in May 1992 by appealing to voters on the basis of his military professionalism, loyalty to the Aquino administration, and a promise to carry out further reforms.[57] Ramos presidency led to the consolidation of Philippines democracy by undertaking series of economic reforms that helped put the country's economy on the path of growth. His presidency also witnessed the restoration of political stability, securing a peace agreement with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) – a Muslim secessionist movement – and negotiating with Communist insurgents and military rebels. These measures ensured that the Philippines was not hit as hard as the other Southeast Asian countries during the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-98. However, post-Marcos economic governance has failed to reduce poverty and unemployment. Therefore, despite successful reformist President like Ramos the country has witnessed the rise of strong populist leaders that won the presidency backed by strong support from the poor voters.[58]

The 2008 financial crisis and its impact on the slowdown of the global economy has made the economic conditions facing the Philippines even more difficult with unemployment rate according to official reports increasing from 7.4 percent in January

2008 to 7.7 percent in January 2009. There has also been a sharp decline in remittances from overseas Filipino workers which is also critical for its economy as it is estimated to be equivalent of 11 percent of the country's GDP. Democratisation and its ultimate success place a high premium on the extent to which the socio-economic conditions of the people are addressed. In this context, the Philippines suffering from high poverty levels along with weakness in its job market provides little avenue for a more stable macroeconomic situation; causing vulnerabilities to its existing democracy. While amongst the citizens of the Philippines, democracy remains the preferred system of government there is also a sense that it has not been able to provide basic services that could upgrade the people's quality of life. This is not just based on high expectations of what democracy is supposed to be able to accomplish but on real lack of performance especially on the socio-economic front.[59]

Joseph E. Estrada who won the elections in 1998 as a consequent of strong support from the poor voters was a product of Ramos's failure, despite his reforms. The need to decrease inequality through job creation and social welfare remains the main policy goals of the Philippines democratic political system. Failure to meet these expectations often led to the rise of strong populist leaders that win the elections.[60]

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Increasing corruption and faltering democratic institutions in the Philippines could slow down the achievement of sustainable growth which would further deepen poverty; threatening the future of its democratic political system

President Rodrigo Duterte who described himself as a populist and a nationalist took office on June 30, 2016, on the strength of a campaign that promised execution of drug dealers and other criminals. Major reforms have been accomplished by the Duterte government in regard to private investment promotion along with infrastructure promotion through the 'Build Build Build' programme, resulting in the economy growing moderately prior to the pandemic. Philippines GDP posted a growth of 7.1 percent in the third quarter of 2021 on account of strong growth in the wholesale and retail trade.[61] Under Duterte there is increasing corruption with the 2019 Corruption Perception Index placing the Philippines 133th least corrupt nation out of 180 countries while the country has also slid down to 54th place in the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index for 2019. Increasing corruption and faltering democratic institutions in the Philippines could slow down the achievement of sustainable growth which would further deepen poverty; threatening the future of its democratic political system.[62]

Philippines' polity over the years has been marked by populist leaders sustained by the country's deep socio-economic inequities. In the May 9, 2022, Presidential and Vice-Presidential elections in which Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Sara Duterte-Carpio, respectively, emerged as winners. During their election campaign

they prioritise the pandemic recovery, which loomed large in the minds of most voters.

SINGAPORE

Singapore which was part of the British Malaya acquired self-governing status in 1959 after limited representative institutions were introduced in 1951, and a constitutional commission three years later which recommended larger measures of participation and self-government. Following the elections in 1955, the moderate left-wing Labour Front, led by David Marshall – a Singapore born Jewish layer – was able to form a coalition government with the UMNO and Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) members. Singapore, until 1959, had limited independence with the British having control over the defence and internal security. After the resignation of Marshall and the appointment of Lim Yew Hock as the first Chief Minister of Chinese origin; by pursuing tough policies towards dissidence and reassuring the British, Lim was able to get an assurance of independence in 1959.[63] Singapore gaining self-governance coincided with the electoral success of the People's Action Party (PAP), which has remained in power ever since the May 1959 elections. The party was founded in November 1954 by English-educated professionals who sought the support of the island's Chinese-educated majority through aligning with radical trade unionists linked to the illegal Communist party of Malaysia. Lee Kuan Yew who became the first PM of Singapore and served from June 1959 until November 1990 played a leading role in founding the PAP. With the merger between peninsular Malaya and Singapore in 1961 the PAP platform called for a democratic

In studying the political discourse in Southeast Asia, Singapore stands out as an anomaly since it has the continuity of a party which has remained in power in a parliamentary democracy.

socialist non-Communist united Malaya. With the establishment of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963, the PAP's unsuccessful electoral foray in the Malaysian elections in May 1964, led to racial tension, followed by Singapore's expulsion from the federation in August 1965. The outcome of Singapore's expulsion from Malaysia helped reinforce the PAP's popular support with the party winning every seat in the legislative assembly from April 1968 until a bye-election in October 1981.[64]

In studying the political discourse in Southeast Asia, Singapore stands out as an anomaly since it has the continuity of a party which has remained in power in a parliamentary democracy. Singapore's political system has been described as a semi-democracy would be a communitarian democracy, a hegemonic electoral authoritarian regime and a dictatorship. Its political system has been described as being autocratic in its centralisation of power in the hands of a small number of individual leaders within the executive branch, with few of the institutionalised checks and balances associated with full-fledged democracy. The PAP government has never blocked the formation of opposition parties and has continued to have elections every five years as required by the constitution; it undertakes the exercise to ensure the legitimacy of its leaders. Further, good governance that helped transform Singapore from a colonial dependency in 1945 to Southeast Asia's most thriving entrepreneurial state and a major

The political stability along with high socio-economic living conditions left little space for the growth of other opposition parties to cultivate support and therefore the PAP remains unchallenged.

regional and global centre for commerce; has been a success story for the PAP's continued rule. While the PAP policies created the world's most hospitable environment for international capital it also carried out aggressive redistributive programmes to ensure that majority of the Singaporeans benefit from the improvements in the standard of living. The political stability along with high socio-economic living conditions left little space for the growth of other opposition parties to cultivate support and therefore the PAP remains unchallenged.[65]

The PAP governed over Singapore without a single opposition member in the parliament until the early 1980s. This was also due to Singapore's immensely complex electoral system, which is the product of repeated amendments to the constitution made possible by the PAP's complete control over the legislature.[66] Singapore's 2020 general election held in July 10 saw the opposition achieve its highest number of elected seats in the parliament since 1963. The PAP won 83 of the 93 seats in the parliament whiles the Workers Party gained four for a total of ten seats. The Workers Party emerged as an alternative to the PAP and its leader Pritam Singh was given the title of the leader of the opposition by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.[67]

THAILAND

Before 1932, the Kingdom of Thailand was referred to as Siam, and it was the only regional state which was never a part of any European colony. Thailand was transformed from an absolute monarchy into a constitutional monarchy, through a bloodless revolution on June 24, 1932. After the government was taken over by the People's Party, the constitution which was inaugurated in December 1932 ensured that the balance of power remained in the hands of the party. With the concentration of power in the hands of the members of the People's Party, it ensured their primacy through appointive monopoly in the assembly and the cabinet. The radical wing of the party, led by Luang Pradit Manuthamin in March 1933 wanted to carry out a coup. The attempted move was muted and Pradit was forced out of office through action undertaken by the King and some conservative nobles. In June 1933, the military staged a coup to install their own man, Phraya Phahon, as PM and was also able to defeat a counter coup in October led by Prince Boworadet. Having defeated its rivals in the left and right, the military was in firm control with their success being confirmed with the abdication of King Prajadhipok in 1935 and with the accession of King Ananda. The increasing prominence of the military stemmed primarily from the advantages of military organisations neatly organised in a single hierarchy, unlike the civilians that lacked unity and were unevenly distributed in small pockets through the society of the capital.[68]

Thereafter, democratisation in Thailand has not been an effortless process given its military-dominated political structure especially

The political pre-eminence of the military began to be challenged from the early 1970s as a consequent of successful economic development, which was accompanied by social change through student activism.

throughout the Cold War, with periodic military coups and the return of military rule.[69] Thailand's constitutional monarchical political system continued to face interference from the military that removed or were involved in removing elected governments. The political pre-eminence of the military began to be challenged from the early 1970s as a consequent of successful economic development, which was accompanied by social change through student activism. In addition, King Bhumibol, who had acquired considerable popular respect for his commitment to rural development, further promoted the democratisation process in the country.[70] Thus, by the 1970s most of the movements and organisations did not see fit to challenge the role of the King as sovereign, but rather chose to frame appeals for civil rights and the restoration of democracy.[71]

On October 14, 1973, when the demonstrators against the military rule were under attack by police and soldiers, the royal family came out in public to allow them to take refuge in the palace compound. By the evening of the same day, the palace struck a deal forcing the junta to end its rule and thus appointing the President of the Privy Council as the new PM. King Bhumibol's act created a lasting impression of him as a democratic monarch with the highest moral authority above all political forces.[72] The King appointed a constitutional assembly in order to draft a new

charter for the conduct of democratic elections. Thailand got a new democratic constitution by 1974 as a consequent of which a large number of political parties competed for votes in the election of 1975. The consequent of which was the formation of a generally weak and unstable government. Further, to add to this was the sharp increase in oil prices in the early 1970s that caused global economic instability also adding pressure on the newly elected Thai government. The 1970s also witnessed massive student political activism that impacted Thai politics with students working to organise movements for social justice causing political mobilisation and polarisation.[73]

Between 1973 and 1976, Thailand had six PM causing major political instability and lack of policy direction and continuity. On the return of former PM, General Thanom Kittikachorn to Thailand from exile in September 1976, led to demonstrations at Thammasat University in Bangkok. On October 6, 1976, rightist elements, supported by the police and some military factions, launched violent attacks that killed the demonstrating students. The fallout from the political chaos of the 1970s led to thousands of young Thai leaving schools and universities and joining communist-led insurgency in the country-side. By the early 1980s, at the initiative of General Saiyud Kerdphol, the government began to welcome young dissidents back to the cities and bring an end to the years of rural fighting between them and the Thai military forces. Under

Between 1973 and 1976, Thailand had six PM causing major political instability and lack of policy direction and continuity.

the Prime Ministership of General Prem Tinsulanonda (1980-1988) and General Chaticahi Choonhavan (1988-1991), the Thai economy began to boom along with the easing of internal conflict.[74]

However, a bloodless coup led by General Suchinda Kraprayoonin February 1991, which successfully removed the elected government of Chaticahi Choonhavan, caused further political chaos disruptions in the ongoing consolidation of Thai democracy. The elections held in March 1992 with the intent to return the country to full civilian rule saw massive vote-buying in the rural areas. This led to a victory by the military-affiliated parties and the appointment of General Suchinda as PM despite not running for office. This provoked violent uproar in Bangkok led by the opposition Paland Dharma (Moral Force) Party. The pro-democracy protest ended tragically – known as 'Black May' – with a series of violent confrontations erupting between the protestors and the army that led to the killing of hundreds.[75]

King Bhumibol Adulyadej intervened, fearing that the situation could spin out of control. The King appointed Anand Panyarachun as interim PM until new elections could be held in September after General Suchinda resigned. In the elections, the Democratic Party came to power controlling 185 out of 360 parliamentary seats, and Chuan Leekpai became the new civilian PM. In January 1995, the Chuan Leekpai government was successful in securing constitutional amendments in the interest of greater democratisation. His coalition lost the July 1995 elections to a new seven-party coalition following which Banharn Silparcha becoming the PM. The coalition collapsed and lost the November 1996 elections to a six-party coalition headed by former army

commander Chavalit Yongchaiyuth, leader of the Aspiration Party. The onset of the Asian Financial crisis in July 1997 led to the fall of the government. This led to the emergence of a new political alignment with the Democratic Party at the core and Chuan Leekpai with the support of the royal and the military assuming the Prime Ministership once again.[76]

Thailand, in 1997, adopted a new constitution in which the bicameral legislature now centred on an elected house of representatives of five hundred members and a two hundred member Senate also elected was to play a secondary role. Suffrage was extended universally, with all candidates required to hold at least a bachelor's degree in order to stand for election.[77] In the January 2001 elections, the first to be held under the 1997 constitution the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) Party founded by Thaksin Shinawatra won 248 of the 500 seats in the National Assembly and became the first elected PM to complete a full term. Thailand's strong economic recovery from the 1997-98 Asian Financial Crisis along with polices carried out by the Thaksin government that targeted rural poverty, drug trade, public health saw a high turnout in the 2005 elections and the TRT winning 374 seats. Allegation of corruptions by the opposition compelled Thaksin to dissolve parliament on February 24, 2006, and snap elections were held

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in April 2006. While the TRT gained 462 seats, the Constitutional Court invalidated the results as the TRT was accused and later found guilty of paying smaller parties to contest the election in order to fulfil the 20 percent rule given in the constitution. A new election was set for October 15, 2006, however it was cancelled when the Royal Thai Army, led by General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, on September 19, 2006, removed the Thaksin government through a coup and thereby marking Thailand's first non-constitutional change of government in fifteen years. On August 19, 2007, Thai voters approved a newly drafted constitution in a referendum. The TRT party and Thaksin was banned from politics as found guilty of misconduct during the 2006 elections. The TRT reformulated itself into the People's Power Party (PPP) to contest the December 2007 elections – the first since the coup. Under the leadership of Samak Sundaravej, the PPP won 233 out of 480 seats in the parliament and formed a coalition government with five other smaller parties.[78]

PM Samak pledged to amend the 2007 constitution, which he believed made it easy for political parties to be disbanded by court order, and had the potential to create a dangerous political vacuum in the governance of the country. This infuriated the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), which was launched in 2005 as an anti-Thaksin campaign. The PAD launched a mass demonstration on May 25, 2008, calling for the resignation of the PM. On August 26, 2008, PAD protestors stormed into the state-run television station and damaged government facilities. Further, 10,000 PAD members marched into the House of Government and occupied the compound till the first of December. The demonstrators wore yellow t-shirts – the colour of the King – as a symbolism of the

monarchy in order to justify their course of action. Fearing that the confrontation between the PAD and the pro-government forces, known as United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) could develop into a civil war, the government declared a State of Emergency on September 2, allowing the military to take control of the situation. On September 9, 2008, the Constitutional Court ruled that PM Samak had violated Article 267 of the Constitution, leading to the resignation of his entire cabinet. Somchai Wongsawat was elected as the leader of the PPP and appointed the PM as a consequence of having a direct link with Thaksin. The PAD, with its mission to erase Thaksin's legacy, renewed its campaign against the Somchai government with refusal to accept anyone from the PPP as the leader of the government. While PM Somchai was in Peru to attend the 16th Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Economic Leaders' Meeting from November 22-23, 2008, the PAD, in order to pressure him to resign, seized Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport, as well as the old Don Mueang Airport. In the aftermath of the airport closure that paralysed the country and held the government hostage the Army Chief Anupong on November 26, suggested the government to dissolve the House. On December 2, the Constitutional Court dissolved the PPP and banned Somchai from politics for five years as it found the party and its leaders guilty of electoral fraud.[79]

The Democrat Party which was a part of the ruling coalition, its leader Abhisit Vejjajiva, through a Parliamentary vote in December 2008 was elected as the PM. The appointment of Abhisit was opposed by the UDD that mobilised mass protest in Bangkok and Pattaya in 2009 paralysing the functioning of the State. At

Nearly five years after the military coup, Thailand held its first elections on March 23, 2019, after the adoption of its new Constitution in 2017.

the July 2011 elections the pro-Thaksin followers of the PPP who in September 2008 formed the Pheu Thai Party won a landslide under the leadership of Yingluck Shinawatra, the youngest sister of Thaksin. The Yingluck government accused of corruption had to dissolve the Parliament and called for snap elections scheduled for February 2, 2014. In the run up to the polling day, Thailand witnessed one of the bloodiest protests with the election result being nullified by the Constitutional Court a month later on grounds that twenty-eight of the 375 wards were prevented by anti-government protestors from holding a ballot. The country without a functioning government and a caretaker PM Yingluck facing corruption charges led to Army General Prayuth Chan-o-cha to declare martial law on the 20th of May. Assurances were given by the General Chan-o-cha who began to serve as the PM that political reform and election would follow without providing any timeline.[80]

Nearly five years after the military coup, Thailand held its first elections on March 23, 2019, after the adoption of its new Constitution in 2017. The new Constitution paved the way for the conduct of the Parliamentary elections while also introducing reforms in the election process. The new Constitution stipulates that out of the 500 members, 350 would be elected under a first-past-the-post system and the remaining 150 would be chosen according to proportional representation. This is a departure from

the previous composition of 375 elected under the first-past-the-post system and the remaining 125 being chosen according to proportional representation.[81] Unlike the members of the House of Representatives, Senate members are not directly elected by the public. Under the new Constitution, out of the 250 seats members, 194 Senators would be selected by the current ruling military government also known as the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) – headed by PM Chan-o-cha was established by the new military government in order to run the country. The remaining six seats in the Senate were reserved for the leaders from the armed forces, the Supreme Commander, the defence Permanent Secretary and the national police chief. The remaining 50 Senators are elected by special panels and consisting of 10 professional and social groups - including bureaucrats, teachers, judges, farmers and private companies – after being approved by the Election Commission through a detailed background check on each of them. The 2017 Constitution also stipulated that the new Senate would convene along with the newly elected House of Representatives. Further, in choosing the next PM of Thailand, all the 500 members of the House as well as the 250 non-elected Senators would join the vote. Therefore, the candidate who receives a combined majority in both houses of the Parliament would be elected as the PM who would then form the new Government.[82]

At the March 2019 elections no party won a majority in the 500-seat lower house with the opposition Pheu Thai party winning 136 seats and the pro-military Palang Pracha Rath (PPRP) winning 115 seats. After the results of the remaining 150 seats decided by proportional system based on the new Constitution was declared

The undemocratic design of Thailand's new constitution prevented the opposition parties from forming a government, even though they won a majority of the vote.

six week after the vote by the Election Commission, the PPRP was in a good position to back its candidate the incumbent PM General Chan-o-cha.[83] Given that the 250 members of the Senate were non-elected and hand-picked by the military, on June 5, 2019, the Parliament voted and General Chan-o-cha was elected as the country's civilian PM.[84] The undemocratic design of Thailand's new constitution prevented the opposition parties from forming a government, even though they won a majority of the vote. While the Pheu Thai remains the strongest opposition party in Thailand, the Future Forward Party (FFP) which had briefly emerged as a new anti-establishment force that offered an alternative, has been dissolved and banned from politics for ten years in February 2020 by the Constitutional Court.[85]

On November 21, 2022, a Royal command approving a constitutional amendment bill passed by the parliament on September 10, 2022, was issued. As per the amendment which will be applicable in the 2023 general elections the number of MPs directly elected in constituencies of the House of Representatives will increase from 350 to 400 and the number of party list MPs in the House will fall to 100 from 150. The electoral system will be changed from a single-ballot system to a two-ballot system – one ballot for candidates in single-seat constituencies and another ballot for the political party of the voter's choice.[86] These changes will favour large and

well-funded political parties such as Pheu Thai and the PPRP and ensure that fewer parties enter parliament in 2023.[87]

EMERGING POLITICAL TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

By examining the emerging political trends in the seven countries in Southeast Asia, it can be said that in terms of the democratic consolidation process – in some of these countries – it remains far from over. Amongst some of these countries which had initiated the democratic reform process, there are instances of backsliding and setbacks while there are also some which have slipped into political chaos with the military and authoritarian parties and leaders imposing their own undemocratic will. However, the general trend is towards maintaining and in some cases towards improving democracy in the region. Further, with the growing and educated middle class in these countries that have access to technological innovation and social media there has been increasing demand for freedoms, transparency, access to decision-making, stronger institutions, and accountability by its leaders.[88]

There exist some common threads across these seven Southeast Asian countries that could help understand the nature of the emerging political discourse. Some of these include, balancing the relations between the military and the civilian government, the issue of disenfranchisement felt by the ethnic and religious

The general trend is towards maintaining and in some cases towards improving democracy in the region.

One of the most significant factors that impacts their successful political transition is on account of the continuous involvement of the military in civilian politics.

minorities, and tackling economic reforms and development. It was found that amongst some of these countries one of the most significant factors that impacts their successful political transition is on account of the continuous involvement of the military in civilian politics. In these countries, military interference in civilian government with coups or attempted coups and the imposition of undemocratic will have undermined their ongoing democratic transition. Further, during the intervening period it has been found that the military quashed oppositions and ratified a new constitution that further weakened civilian governments, and guarantee its (military) continued control over domestic politics. The emerging trends also indicate the repression of pro-democratic networks which in the future could plunge the country deeper into authoritarianism.

In studying the process of democratic transitions in Southeast Asian, it has been characterised by mass movements in the forms of protest, strikes, and street demonstrations, carried out by political parties, trade unions, student, and religious organisations. These have been undertaken to address socio-economic inequalities

The existence of regional and socio-economic inequality could predispose further imbalances and also derail the ongoing democratic process.

Polarisation along religion, ethnic, and ideological lines not only impact the democratic process but also disrupts the developmental agenda, further pushing the socio-economic inequalities.

apart from issues of ethnic and religious minority repressions, and against authoritarian and repressive governance. The existence of regional and socio-economic inequality could predispose further imbalances and also derail the ongoing democratic process. The failure of the government towards addressing key socio-economic challenges in turn leads to widespread disillusionment with the political establishment. This loss of public trust has in turn led to the rise of populist parties, movements, and leaders which is being witnessed in some of the countries in Southeast Asia. These have a number of consequences on the national political system including that of increasing polarisation along ethnic and religious lines. In Malaysia, the coalition led by UMNO which held power from independence in 1957 until 2018, and after three years in 2021 came back in power, has used polarisation on the basis of ethnicity to win and maintain support. Meanwhile, Indonesia has witnessed political divide between Islamist and more pluralist forces become more evident in the last decade.

While polarisation on the basis of religious and ethnic lines has been found to be the most common across most of these Southeast Asian countries, there is also the division being witnessed in lines of ideology. In the case of Thailand, we have the royal nationalist camp that defends the political power of the monarchy while the opposing side demand a more democratic and egalitarian polity. Polarisation along religion, ethnic, and ideological lines not only

impact the democratic process but also disrupts the developmental agenda, further pushing the socio-economic inequalities. Thus, in the long run both democracy and development would be impacted.

FACTORS SHAPING THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

While democratic transition remains in process, for some of the Southeast Asian countries, there are factors that shape the political narratives. The 21st century presents new challenges with regards to the political discourse. The post-9/11 period marked by growing extremist activities brings divisions in the existing social-religious fabric in the countries of Southeast Asia. Further, the economic slowdown felt across Southeast Asia in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008 along with the growing assertiveness of China in the region have impacted the Southeast Asia's socio-economic security; creating further political imbalances (emphasis added).[89] The economic fallout due to the COVID-19 pandemic is further fuelling the socio-economic divide within the region. This comes as an additional challenge to the ongoing democratic transition in Southeast Asia, where nations are already trying to overcome their existing social and political unrest steaming from ethnic and religious differences. This could further pose a threat to the political stability of States which are already facing institutional weakness or have limited capacity to address these challenges. The unstable and weak domestic political environment compels national leaders to become more conservative and cautious in their

policy approaches. This, in turn, impacts their ability to address emerging security concerns in the region.[90]

The internal discord prevailing within Southeast Asia along with the external factors poses a threat to the existing socio-economic inequalities and the larger political environment. This section will address some of the key internal and external factors that are shaping the democratic transition in Southeast Asia.

INTERNAL FACTORS

In Southeast Asia all conflicts are pre-dominantly intra-State in nature, mostly in marginal and border regions; from Aceh and Papua in Indonesia, to Mindanao in the Philippines, to the three southern- most provinces of Thailand. The conflicts in the Philippines and Thailand are representative of the link between prolonged inequalities which enhances social tension. In the Philippines the issue of underdevelopment in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) has led to tensions and a source of violent conflict. The Moro National Liberation Front or MNLF in Mindanao which was founded in 1972 is a leading organisation amongst Moro separatists. In 1996, the MNLF signed a landmark peace agreement with the Philippines government that saw the creation of ARMM in which the predominantly Muslim population enjoys a degree of self-rule. Nur Misuara was installed

The conflicts in the Philippines and Thailand are representative of the link between prolonged inequalities which enhances social tension.

as the region's governor but his rule ended in violence when he led a failed rebellion against the Philippine government in November 2001.[91] The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) that envisioned greater autonomy in Bangsamoro had been active since 1970s by engaging in violent extremism. In January 2019, residents of ARMM overwhelmingly voted to ratify the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL). This paved the way for the creation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) which replaced the earlier ARMM. BARMM would be implemented by a coalition of MILF, MNLF, and incumbent ARMM officials as part of the Bangsamoro Transitional Authority (BTA). Mindanao has a long history of political violence, on account of widespread poverty and grievances of under-representation of the Moro people.[92]

In this backdrop of socio-economic and political volatility, it has led to the resiliency of terrorism in the region resulting in 400,000 people fleeing their homes as the fight between government forces and elements of the MILF escalated. The failure of the Philippine government to resolve the long running confrontation with the Moro people has also provided opportunities for international terrorists such as the Islamic State (IS) and its regional partners such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and the Maute Group that are important constituents of terrorism in Mindanao.[93] For example, the siege of Marawi in 2017 not only featured many Filipino Islamic States affiliates but also foreign fighters from Indonesia and Malaysia.[94]

In Thailand, inequalities exist amongst rural populations and the Islamic communities. Both hold grievances, as demonstrated by the insurgents concentrated in Muslim-dominated southern

Thailand and the 'Red Shirts' protest of March 2010 that represented the rural poor. As per reports by Thailand's Ministry of Social Development and the UNDP, poverty is concentrated in Thailand's rural Northern, Northeastern, and Southeastern regions. The Muslim-concentrated rural Deep South experiences a double burden as it is the area hosting the highest number of rural poor.[95] The Deep South which includes the three provinces of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat has a majority Malay-Muslims population and shares a border with Malaysia. An economic survey has found that around 15 percent of the local Malay-Muslims are unemployed and, over one-third of the population is not properly educated. The Thai government's failure to realise the fundamental needs of the Malay-Muslims have exacerbated the locals' grievance fuelling the separatists' rage towards the government.[96]

Polarisation along ethnic lines also seems to be impacting the nature of democratisation in countries of Southeast Asia. In Indonesia after the resignation of Suharto in mid-1998 and East Timor's successful demand for a referendum on independence, it intensified separatist hopes in Irian Jaya. President Abdurrahman Wahid introduced a more accommodative and culturally sensitive approach to the question of ethnic conflict and separatist demand by changing the name of the province to Papua. Further, in 2001 through Law 21/2001 enacted by the national Parliament, Papua was granted Special Autonomy. In 2003, before the transition to special autonomy was complete, the central government split Papua into two provinces: Papua with Jayapura as its capital, and West Papua with Manokwari as its capital. Despite the efforts of the central government to calm separatist tensions by providing

special autonomy and increased funding, there is a widespread perception that development in Papau is a failed process.[97]

The Organisasi Papua Merdeka (OPM) or Free Papua Organisation that emerged as a local movement in Manokwari in 1965 has its military wing, the Tentara Pembebasan Nasional Papua Barat (TPNPB), which continues to bear arms with sporadic attacks against the Indonesian military forces which it regards as illegal occupiers of West Papua. Present-day conflicts in Papua include disputes over natural resources and economic and political power struggles, and frictions between different ethnicities, religion, and immigrants and locals.[98] The experience of displacement and marginalisation has also fuelled Papuan resentment and persistent call for independence. The spread of Papuan resentment is based upon not only a sense of ethnic disadvantage but a specific set of grievances related to indigenous rights and encroachment on traditional lands and resources.[99] The separatist movement in Papua has used the plight of the Papuan communities to create pessimism and distrust over the ability of the Central Government to accelerate development.

In Malaysia the Malays which are the largest ethnic group and comprise 50.8 percent of the population, the emerging socio-economic inequalities over the last two decades has created an environment for deep political polarisation. Ever since its

The separatist movement in Papua has used the plight of the Papuan communities to create pessimism and distrust over the ability of the Central Government to accelerate development.

Apart from race other key factor such as religion and its increasing role seen since the late 1970s has increased sectarian divisions and amplified the Islamist-secularist divide.

independence, the dominant narrative of national identify has been rooted along the ethnic lines. Further, the increasing economic inequalities between ethnic communities witnessed since 1997 has fuelled support for ethno-nationalist appeals. A large share of those deemed to be in the bottom 40 percent are economically insecure and are composed of Malays and East Malaysians. This economic inequality and insecurity has often been used by the political elites to their advantage. The failure to address economic inequalities saw the collapse of the PH in February 2020 and the PN in August 2021. This indicates how the political elites have been able to effectively tap into economic insecurities. Apart from race other key factor such as religion and its increasing role seen since the late 1970s has increased sectarian divisions and amplified the Islamist-secularist divide. These have played into further polarisation and instability of coalition governments whose priority has been political survival rather than policy solutions to address the country's challenges.[100]

Southeast Asia has witnessed the largest relative increase in terms of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), which is another factor that adds to the security challenges. The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) in recent years has increased their activities along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border areas. While the ARSA in terms of operational capability remains a low-level threat in comparison to the Arakan Army (AA), which since November 2018 has been

in conflict with the Myanmar military. Western Myanmar has witnessed an intensification of violence in 2020 with several major clashes between the AA and the government forces in the Rakhine state and bordering southern Chin State. The escalating clashes have raised fears of a growing humanitarian crisis in the Rakhine states with over 226,000 people so far being displaced since 2018. At least 730,000 Rohingyas have fled to Bangladesh since 2017 following the deadly violence in Rakhine state. The escalation of the conflict has also created new uncertainties for the safe repatriation of more than a million Rohingya refugees currently residing in Bangladesh. The repatriation process has also come to a standstill due to the ongoing political crisis in Myanmar along with factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic.[101]

In Myanmar, the national authorities have barely recognised the existence or severity of internal displacement and refuse to let other national or international actors engage with IDPs. As their normal livelihoods are disrupted by displacement, IDPs are particularly vulnerable in terms of income and food security. In fact, most displaced persons lived below the poverty line even before the displacement and suffered the loss of stable livelihoods and further impoverishment as a result of displacement. Without sufficient access to food and employment opportunities, IDPs become vulnerable to recruitment by rebel forces and become

The security vulnerabilities as a consequent of the social and humanitarian crisis are likely to impact the democratic consolidation.

from victims of conflict to perpetrators of harm.[102] The security vulnerabilities as a consequent of the social and humanitarian crisis are likely to impact the democratic consolidation. The failure of the government towards addressing key socio-economic challenges leads to widespread disillusionment with the political establishment. This loss of public's trust has often led to the rise of populist parties, movements and leaders being witnessed in Southeast Asia. This would have a number of consequences on the national political system including that of increasing polarisation along various lines.[103]

EXTERNAL FACTORS

The emerging regional and global developments that include increasing geo-political tensions, emerging and complex security environment, and ongoing conflicts leading to mounting inflationary pressure in the midst of a post-pandemic recovery. While being external in nature it adds pressures on the existing political institutions. Some of the key external challenges that factor into shaping the democratic process in Southeast Asian countries are being examined as follows:

An Assertive China

The security environment in Southeast Asia since the 1990s has changed significantly, since external powers were only marginally involved in Southeast Asia. The growing influence of China in Southeast Asia has created some security concerns with the region being held hostage to the power politics of major

Amongst a number of pressing security challenges in Southeast Asia, maritime and territorial disputes over the contested waters of the South China Sea (SCS) have become among the biggest flashpoints which has fuelled Beijing's military modernisation in the aftermath of Washington's "Pivot to Asia".

powers. The China threat in the post 9/11 years has intensified major-power rivalries in Southeast Asia and this is affecting the growth and prosperity of the region.[104] China's great power potential, combined with its latent expansionist ambitions and increasingly assertive foreign policy stance, is a cause of concern as it is a threat to regional and global security. Southeast Asia holds a special place in China's policy mind due to its geography, its historical, economic ties and having 30 million ethnic Chinese scattered throughout the region. Amongst a number of pressing security challenges in Southeast Asia, maritime and territorial disputes over the contested waters of the South China Sea (SCS) have become among the biggest flashpoints which has fuelled Beijing's military modernisation in the aftermath of Washington's "Pivot to Asia". As the sea plays a role as a natural security shield for China's densely populated southern regions and ports; Beijing's traditional emphasis on economic growth is now increasingly accompanied by more nationalistic postures on political and securityissues.[105]

With the rise of China and its increasing activity in the region it has also prompted other external powers to expand their engagement in the region. China's unilateral actions in the SCS along with it trying to improve and expand its links with allies and potential

allies in the region through investments and offering weapons as aid or for sale is fuelling tension between China and a number of countries in Southeast Asia. China's maritime disputes with a number of Southeast Asian countries have increased anxieties due to the growing potential for armed conflict or negative impact on sea shipping lanes. While the tension with China over the SCS has always existed, it is in comparison nowhere near the level they have reached today. According to China's self-declared maritime boundary – the 'nine-dash line' – the Paracel and the Spratly islands falls well within China's maritime boundary. Four Southeast Asian countries are involved in the SCS territorial and maritime boundary disputes with China. Malaysia and the Philippines claim jurisdiction over some of the Spratly Islands while Brunei claims jurisdiction over adjacent maritime space. China and Vietnam's major dispute in the SCS is over the Paracel and the Spratly islands. The contention over the Paracel islands is a bilateral dispute between Vietnam and China, while the dispute over the Spratly apart from the other three ASEAN members also includes Taiwan.[106]

Since 2010, sovereignty disputes in the SCS have intensified with rise in the number of standoffs that includes low intensity engagements such as firing at fishing vessels by the navies of some of the claimants. Further, China's unilateral action to increase its military presence in the region includes construction of new

While the tension with China over the SCS has always existed, it is in comparison nowhere near the level they have reached today.

This threat perception from an extra regional power has been one of the major drivers of increased military acquisitions by countries in Southeast Asia.

military bases in the SCS. This poses to be a major challenge as it impacts regional peace and stability.[107] The contestation over the demarcation of maritime borders in the SCS, which in recent years has witnessed China's unswerving sovereignty claims over disputed waters in the region are supported by its ongoing military modernisation and growing economic clout. The combination of these two factors is changing the overall configuration of the regional security architecture.[108]

Thus, the rapid growth of China as a military power and its renewed activities in the SCS is one of the major drivers of increased military spending, arms acquisitions and forced deployment amongst Southeast Asian countries that are part of the ongoing dispute. For instance, Indonesia's increasing defence spending is being driven by increasing tensions in the SCS even though it is not a party to any territorial or marine claims over the Spratly or Paracel Islands in the SCS. China's claim to the SCS based on its nine-dash lines runs very close to the Natuna Islands, and is a cause of concern for Indonesia as there has been a record number of incidents in recent years in which Indonesian navy arrested Chinese fishing vessels which had entered the overlapping area. In July 2017, Indonesian officials announced that they had renamed the waters northeast of the Natuna Islands, located at the far southern end of the SCS, the 'NorthNatunaSea'.[109]

This threat perception from an extra regional power has been one of the major drivers of increased military acquisitions by countries in Southeast Asia. The military equipment being acquired include combat aircraft, anti-submarine warfare aircraft, air defence systems, coastal defence systems, submarines and major surface combat ships. Such equipment has little or no value in internal conflicts, or for policing functions or disaster relief. Further, the acquisitions of tanker aircraft, large and long-range combat aircraft, long-range air-to-ground missiles, large submarines and surface combat ships as well as amphibious assault landing ships, indicate a strategy of building the capability to engage with any threat from another country, even one far away from the home country, as well as the capability to strike at a foreign country or protect far-off interests such as trade routes or source of raw materials.[110]

Given the strategic significance of the SCS, it has led to the individual claims being defended resulting in low intensity standoff between China and some Southeast Asian countries. ASEAN has called for the exercise of restraint through its declaration on the SCS. This declaration ensured a unified ASEAN position that included the non-use of force along with the resolution of disputes by peaceful means.[111] While on the surface ASEAN member states have shown a consensus on broad goals for achieving the Code of Conduct (COC), the reality is that this would not help solve the core disputes completely. The official position of the group is that the COC is a necessary condition for promoting region-wide confidence for avoiding lawlessness, and help avoid greater risk of escalation of tensions.[112]

The ongoing competing claims in the SCS is becoming a destabilising factor as it encourages the rise of populist leaders who are trying to promote their '*strongman*' credentials by using the security threats posed by China to build upon their domestic political agenda

Since the 2009 publication of China's nine dash line map, Beijing has demonstrated both its capacity and intent to enforce its claims.[113] Under President Xi Jinping, China's SCS policy has undergone a major adjustment – from his predecessor's passive adherence to the SCS status quo to stress on pushing its core interests more vigorously. Xi's new approach is assertive in response to the changed SCS security environment that includes heavier intervention from outside powers, more coordinated ASEAN stance behind its claimants and mounting international pressure on China to follow the UNCLOS rules and norms. China does not reject multilateralism as a mechanism for crisis management – as evidenced by its ongoing COC engagement with the ASEAN – however, it continues to insist on bilateralism in seeking sovereignty resolution. While there are merits to an early conclusion of the COC in the SCS which would help avoid stand-offs and prevent all parties from pushing the envelopes, there remains a challenge for formulating a mutually acceptable COC. Some ASEAN countries want the COC to address China's sovereignty claims, which is based on its nine-dash-line. Beijing, on the other hand, is against touching on the issue of the EEZ demarcation and nine-dash-line, which according to them would render the COC a zero-sum game.[114]

The ongoing competing claims in the SCS is becoming a destabilising factor as it encourages the rise of populist leaders who are trying to promote their 'strongman' credentials by using the security threats posed by China to build upon their domestic political agenda.[115] China's maritime assertiveness such as denying fisherman access to traditional fishing grounds and the firing at fishing vessels; do not only threaten the national interest of the Southeast Asian countries that are part of the ongoing disputes, but it also produces disequilibrium in their political system. The threat to national interest and security often triggers a rally around the flag effect which increases public support for the incumbent leader. Alternatively, leaders can attempt to legitimise their right to authority by claiming to have a special capacity to maintain the nation's security and international status. Political leaders will seek publicity for policies that they believe will bolster their domestic political support while would insulate unpopular policies that could trigger public opposition. President Jokowi holding of a limited cabinet meeting on an Indonesian naval ship in the Natuna waterways on account of Chinese intervention in Indonesian waters around the Natuna Islands; are seen as a well-publicised event to mobilise public support. This enabled the Indonesian government to deflect any criticism of its handling of its territorial disputes. Further, it had the desired effect of boosting Jokowi's approval ratings in public surveys, which showed that

Increasing Chinese threat and its assertiveness in the SCS becomes a key external factor because it is exerting an increasingly strong influence in the domestic politics in Southeast Asia.

67 percent supported his course of action and believed that he was committed to defending Indonesia's territory.[116] Given that political contestation in Southeast Asia remains high, the ongoing tension in the SCS often becomes a tool that state elites use to maintain their political standing. Therefore, increasing Chinese threat and its assertiveness in the SCS becomes a key external factor because it is exerting an increasingly strong influence in the domestic politics in Southeast Asia.

The Global War on Terror and the Pandemic

The security environment in Southeast Asia has altered significantly over the past two decades. In the late 1990s, Southeast Asia was a region of mainly internal conflicts, some of which were quite intense mainly over land and maritime borders, and interest zones. However, processes to resolve these internal conflicts and inter-state tensions were ongoing and many showed promise. By the early 2000s the region seemed to be moving towards a peaceful future having recovered from the 1997–1998 financial crises. Further, by engaging more with other states and international organisations on security matters in 2001, the region became a nuclear weapon-free zone.[117] The situation since then has deteriorated significantly which could be attributed to the fallout from the global war on terror. The consequence of this has

> The 'war on terror' and 'with us or against us' approach polarised both the political elites and the communities in Southeast Asia by further exacerbating the already existing divisions in identity that have been a consequence of different social and religious histories.

been felt most severely in Southeast Asia, which in the aftermath of the September 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington witnessed a similar fate. By late 2001, the global 'war on terror' had acquired an Asian front and Southeast Asia was at the centre. The 'war on terror' and 'with us or against us' approach polarised both the political elites and the communities in Southeast Asia by further exacerbating the already existing divisions in identity that have been a consequence of different social and religious histories.[118]

The opening of its front by the governments of Southeast Asian countries brought the spectre of foreign military forces on their soil, an erosion of business confidence, and political upheaval. On the political front given that Southeast Asia has the largest Muslim population, the global 'war on terror' created a divide between the Muslim and non-Muslim world. While those that are engaged in committing violence are very small in numbers, yet a far larger number of people are being affected by the resulting political and civilisational divide.[119] In Malaysia, which is divided based on ethnic lines, since its independence there has been the divide between Islamists and secularists. In Indonesia, public anger with the US is helping mainstream Islamic parties like the Prosperous Justice party (PKS). For instance, polarisation was much evident during the 2019 Presidential elections, between Jokowi and Prabowo in which the former was depicted as an enemy of the ummah (the Muslim community) by Prabowo's campaign. This was followed by Jokowi and his coalition going on the offensive and leveraged an equally polarising narrative about the rival camp, claiming that Prabowo's victory would lead to an Islamic caliphate and that his coalition as a threat to Indonesia's pluralist national identity.[120]

The terrorist threat compounds the vulnerabilities of states that are already over-stretched in dealing with the health crisis and the economic fallout from the pandemic.

Transnational threats such as terrorism and pandemic do not respect national boundaries and pose a challenge for internal as well as regional stability. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has had further pushed the existing socio-economic inequalities across Southeast Asia. As per the Asian Development Bank report released in March 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed 4.7 million people in Southeast Asia into extreme poverty in 2021, with about 9.3 million losing their jobs.[121] During the General Debate of the 75th Session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2020, the then Malaysian PM Muhyiddin Yassin warned about the resurgence of terrorism across the globe who would take advantage of the socio-economic impact of COVID-19.[122] The terrorist threat compounds the vulnerabilities of states that are already over-stretched in dealing with the health crisis and the economic fallout from the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created conditions for extremists to easily propagate their propaganda, disinformation and conspiracy theories online. Misinformation campaigns on the pandemic being spread by the extremists are focused on inaccurate data on government policy, false reporting on the number of COVID-19 cases as well as the number of deaths and the extent of community spread of the virus. This is creating an environment of social and political uncertainty with the sowing of discord and mistrust along with misinformation blaming specific communities such

as the Chinese nationals. The socio-economic fallout caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is also being exploited by radical groups in Indonesia including the Jamaah Ansharud Daulah (JAD), who are engaged in propagating a variety of narratives aimed at recruiting new members and inciting supporters to violence. In 2020, Indonesia witnessed at least seven attacks and eight foiled terrorist plots. The Islamic State (IS) Central is also urging its affiliates worldwide to exploit the fact that governments are caught up trying to combat the coronavirus, and carry out attacks. In the Philippines following from the IS-linked Marawi siege in 2017, which left a trail of death and destruction on the civilian population, the continued grievances of the high number of IDPs over their inadequate living conditions as well as being uprooted from their homes are yet to be effectively addressed. The COVID-19 and the lockdown measures enforced to combat the pandemic have further disrupted the rebuilding efforts. This enhances the risk of radicalisation among the vulnerable people, particularly amongst the youth who are unemployed which may lead to political violence and social unrest.[123] In Thailand, the socio-economic strains caused by the pandemic have changed existing dynamics of polarisation by creating divisions inside the pro-establishment camp. Leaders in the public health sector, traditionally staunch allies of the establishment, have publicly criticised the government over the handling of the health crisis. As a result of the Thai government's poor management of the health crisis and its economic fallout there are increasing grievances against the establishment.[124]

Like in Thailand the spread of COVID-19 and the subsequent economic damage and increasing inequality, has raised anger in other Southeast Asian countries. Countries in the region has

These insurgencies derive sustenance from the socio-economic and political grievances of the marginalise population in these countries which remain heightened ever since 9/11 and could further accelerate in the post-pandemic period.

witnessed large anti-government protest which also resulted in the collapse of Malaysia's government in August 2021; partly because of political in-fighting and also because of its citizen's anger over the handling of the health crisis. Therefore, the failure to control the pandemic as well as failure to limit its socio-economic fallout has damaged the legitimacy of the existing political establishments in Southeast Asia. This could create conditions for political change where in the leaders could push amendments to the constitution that could help enhance their executive power.[125]

Instability and political disorder in one Southeast Asian country could strengthen centrifugal forces elsewhere in the region, since local rebellion no longer remains an isolated phenomenon. For instance, the rebellion in Aceh although derived from local sources is linked to a series of Muslim insurgencies of varying degrees of intensity, from southern Thailand to southern Philippines. These insurgencies derive sustenance from the socio-economic and political grievances of the marginalise population in these countries which remain heightened ever since 9/11 and could further accelerate in the post-pandemic period.[126]

CONCLUSION

By studying the political environment over the last few decades in these countries it can be said that democratic consolidation in Southeast Asia continues to remain in progress. The prevailing socio-economic structures, demographic diversities, along with the need to manage their unique values, traditions, and customs while adapting to the new security realities continues to shape the evolving political system in Southeast Asia. By the end of the 20th century Southeast Asia was catching on the wave of democratisation which was occurring in the other parts of the world, resulting in democratic reforms. These transitions in Southeast Asia have not only established democracy but promoted openness within the region such as helped reinforce normative scrutiny through ASEAN.

However, over the last two decades the political environment in Southeast Asia has undergone considerable change. The recent political events in some of the countries in Southeast Asia would suggest that political stability cannot be taken for granted. Myanmar witnessing the ouster of a democratically elected government, to increasing polarisation along ethnic, religious and ideological lines along with the increasing anti-democratic trends found in Cambodia – have raised questions about the nature and trajectory of democratic transitions in Southeast Asia. These political developments are resulting in the loss of public confidence

These transitions in Southeast Asia have not only established democracy but promoted openness within the region such as helped reinforce normative scrutiny through ASEAN.

As political instability promotes disorders and heightens a sense of internal crisis, it would prolong social stability and political cohesion which are necessary conditions for economic and social development. This brings doubts and uncertainties as to whether some of the Southeast Asian countries that are transitioning have the ability to steer the course of political change towards democratic consolidation.

with the existing political institutions, its leadership, and tendencies of authoritarian rule among popularly elected leaders.

Given that Southeast Asia's politics has for long and continues to interact with wider regional and global developments, the emerging political trends could also be attributed to the increasing security considerations both internally as well as externally. While China's unyielding claim to almost the entire area of the SCS is reshaping the contours of domestic politics in Southeast Asia, the US-led Global War on Terror which intensified fears about Islamic radicalism is fuelling religious polarisation. As political instability promotes disorders and heightens a sense of internal crisis, it would prolong social stability and political cohesion which are necessary conditions for economic and social development. This brings doubts and uncertainties as to whether some of the Southeast Asian countries that are transitioning have the ability to steer the course of political change towards democratic consolidation.

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SAPRU HOUSE PAPER

Indian Council
of World Affairs

Sapru House, Barakhamba Road, New Delhi- 110 001, India
Tel. : +91-11-23317242, Fax: +91-11-23322710

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