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Working with Countries in Transition: Fostering Democracy

by

Dr Eric Teo Chu Cheow

*Managing Director, Savoir Faire Corporate Consultants,
Singapore*

*Council Secretary, Singapore Institute for International Affairs
(SIIA)*

Southeast Asia has witnessed an electoral and political transition year in 2004-05, in:

- **Malaysia (legislative) on 21 March;**
- **Indonesia (legislative) on 5 April;**
- **Philippines (presidential, half senatorial and half congressional), 10 May;**
- **again Indonesia (presidential) in two rounds, 5 July and 29 September; and**
- **Thailand (legislative) on 6 February 2005.**

- A political transition in Singapore, from PM Goh Chok Tong to Lee Hsien Loong, will take place on 20 August 2005.

Southeast Asia has undergone a monumental electoral year, with democracy being at the fore of politics, changes in store and stability well tested, in the five older members of ASEAN.

The Affirmation of Democracy in post-Asian Crisis Southeast Asia

- A crisis of governance
- A new *contrat social* to negotiate
- 4 Political Trends emanating from the Crisis
- Nexus of the New Asian Economy Shifting
- 4 Social & Civil Society Openings in SEAsia

Four Political Trends Emanating from the Asian Crisis

- the cry for democracy and reforms
- increased popular and local-level assertiveness
- greater public accountability
- re-defining the concept of power and politics

But institution-building is still weak in Southeast Asia.

The nexus of the Asian political economies is shifting from a duopole (big government-big business) to a tripolar structure (authorities-private sector-civil society).

4 Changes in the Social & Civic Arena: Re-Negotiating the New *Contrat Social* in Southeast Asia

- The rise of civil society in Asia now appears irreversible.
- The rising civil society realizes its greater role in the new “tripolar” nexus.
- The role of intellectuals will inexorably increase.
- A period of introspection in the region began, with a feeling of Asian vulnerability.

But **two pairs of indigenous elements** have also come to the fore in Southeast Asia, when reflecting on democracy, change and stability:

- Religion (political Islam) and development; and
- the Intrinsic link between economic growth and re-distribution on one hand and political change and stability on the other.

Political Islam, Democracy & Development: The Islamic Developmental Agenda

- the place and role of Islam in politics and society in Southeast Asia was re-defined (for example, *Hadhari Islam* in Malaysia), plus moderate Islam in Indonesia, South Thailand or Southern Philippines
- the fundamental debate linking the Islamic faith with economic development & social tolerance
- the brand of Islam, which should be upheld and taught in Muslim education system
- the crucial debate on terrorism and the fight against international terror.

Healthy Economic Growth and Sustainable Socio-Economic Re-distribution: Key to Social and Political Stability & The “Democratic Development”

- Economic growth was a major issue in electoral campaigning.
- The economy inevitably “predominates” politics and political stability in Southeast Asia today.
- Hence, one of the most important pillars in sustaining economic growth is the re-distribution of wealth, rural uplift and the utmost importance of creating a budding middle class, which would in turn “anchor” sustainable socio-economic development and growth.

- The cries of democracy and “free liberalism” alone would not guarantee social and political stability; stability should instead be built on sound social re-distribution and social justice, especially the fight against corruption and power politics.
- Sustainable socio-economic redistribution, development and growth are thus crucial for Southeast Asia’s social and political stability.

Potential of an Anti-Democracy Trends & Pressure Against “Rogue States”

- Therein lies the fundamental challenge and danger to democracy in Southeast Asia.
- An uneven or unfair social redistribution, plagued by corruption and nepotism would surely be the greatest impediment to the sustainability of democracy in Southeast Asia.
- Perhaps, Washington and Europe should also focus on stressing the importance of *volontarist* efforts by Southeast Asian governments to redistribute wealth within their countries as a means of social and political stabilization. A true contrat social to be re-negotiated in SEAsia.
- If not, an anti-democracy trend could emerge.
- Social policies have therefore to come to the fore to balance pure liberalism, as in Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia.
- Potential anti-democracy trends are therefore always present in ASEAN countries, especially when the development agenda appears unfair, unbalanced and lop-sided.
- For pressure against “rogue states”, ASEAN civil society is slowly waking up to this exigency, Myanmar being perhaps the necessary spark to awaken ASEAN’s civic and political agenda for ASEAN NGOs.

How Could the United States Support “Democratic Development” in Asia?

The United States has a capital role to play in supporting “democratic development” within Asia and in particular, in ASEAN, in the following **10 ways**:

- Washington must stay engaged in ASEAN, not only through its support for the democratic movement and developments, but equally importantly, via the channeling of economic assistance and technological transfer.
- US aid for poverty alleviation constitutes a major challenge, just as US foreign policy in the region must not be narrowly pursued through the “lens of terrorism” alone.
- Poverty alleviation and greater social justice would also reduce the “radicalization” of substantial chunks of the Southeast Asian population.
- The socio-economic aspect of terrorism and religious extremism, or the reduction of the frustration in certain disenchanting segments of ASEAN society must be underscored, with American and Western assistance.

- In such cases, the big stick approach would not be necessarily useful and effective, whereas a “soft approach” could work better. American soft power has permeated well since the 1950s in a large cross-section of ASEAN.
- Soft economic and cultural power are indeed America’s best trump-card and should therefore not be neglected or abandoned at a time when the esteem for the US in the region has undoubtedly dropped.
- For maturing democracies in the region, Washington must help spread the message that democratic institution-building is of utmost importance, as well as the governments’ fight against corruption and nepotism.
- Good governance (and greater social justice) must be enshrined in the ASEAN region as the most sustainable means of democratic development in ASEAN, and Washington must be seen to be at the cutting edge of leading this promotion regionally.
- Lastly, the United States should, as a world superpower, project its might and in terms of defending the rights of the peoples of ASEAN, but these rights should embrace not only human rights and democracy, but also economic and social rights, which the poorest segments of ASEAN society seek and cherish.
- Only then, could the United States be widely perceived in Southeast Asia as a true defender of democracy, and not the defender of “the democracy of the rich, privileged and powerful”.

Conclusion in 3 points

- In conclusion, democracy has irreversibly arrived or is arriving in Southeast Asia, but it is not necessarily accompanied by good governance. Political and social stability, though developing steadily, is still vulnerable, thereby maintaining high geo-political risks in Southeast Asia today.
- On the other hand, sustainable economic development and growth, as well as socio-economic re-distribution (not democracy alone) are key to Asia's long-term social and political stability. Good governance and a rising middle class would, in turn, "guarantee" democracy and stability in Southeast Asia.
- Washington must try to "enhance democracy, good governance and greater social redistribution and justice in a package", and not in a peace-meal fashion, which serves the interests of neither the United States nor ASEAN countries in any helpful manner.