

Southeast Asian democracy: New time and take

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Anti-government protests in Southeast Asian countries have become quite a regular trend. In Cambodia, political unrest has become violent as the government employed forces fired on the protesters claiming increases in the minimum wage in January 2014. In Thailand, there is protest against the proxy government led by Yingluck Shinawatra. In Malaysia, protesters rallied against price hikes in petrol in the first week of January this year and in Indonesia, the rise of Joko Widodo aka Jakowi is largely viewed as a challenge to the established rule of Susilo Bambang Yodhoyono who is about to complete his second and last term as the President. All these protests have some commonalities; yet, they are different in nature, extent and implications.

The Cambodian unrest, led by the opposition leader Sam Rainsy and his deputy Kem Sokha is an effort to drive out Hun Sen government, which has been in power for nearly three decades. The Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) has won support from the garment workers and a section of the angry land owners who had lost their land due to the government's policy of redistributing land to the private developers since early 2000s. The Democrat Party in Thailand is keen on ousting the shadow government of Yingluck Shinawatra, who, along with the ruling Pheu Thai party, are alleged to act on the wishes of Thaksin Shinawatra, who is in self-exile to escape various charges of misuse of power as prime minister (2001-2006).

In Cambodia, Malaysia and Thailand, the ruling parties have been losing popularity and the opposition gaining ground. In Thailand, the last election held on February 2, 2014 was not accepted by the opposition and they demanded for a Peoples Council for administration of the country. In Cambodia, for the first time, the Cambodian Peoples' Party (CPP) lost significant number of seats to the Cambodian National Rescue Party, in the last election held in July 2013. Similarly, in Malaysia, the 2013 election results were the worst for the 56-year rule of the Barisan Nasional government led by Najib Razak.

While many of these anti-establishment feelings are internal to the Southeast Asian countries, it cannot be ignored that these internal changes will have implications for the Southeast Asian region.

The New York Times reported that foreign investors are increasingly becoming annoyed with the ongoing political turmoil in Thailand, which forced the government to declare a 60-day emergency in the capital and surrounding areas. The same news report said, "The Thai stock market has fallen more than 10 percent since November and concerns are growing that tourism will fall, companies may not locate in Bangkok and ambitious infrastructure projects will be delayed".¹ Toyota is also reported to have warned the government of its dilemma to invest \$600 million in Thailand.

Cambodia known for attracting foreign multinationals engaged in garment manufacturing may face a setback over the protest of the garment workers demanding a minimum wage equivalent to USD 160 per month. Speculations about relocating the manufacturing units from Cambodia, may take a serious turn if Prime Minister Hun Sen and his party fail to complete the negotiation successfully with the opposition party. As CNRP is now keen on reformation of the National Election Council (NEC) which is responsible for supervising election. The incumbent

¹ Ibid

government, on the contrary, is not willing. A new stalemate may emerge in Cambodia hindering the possibility of restoration of peace.

The Asian Development Bank has already announced a slow economic growth forecast for Southeast Asia (around 5.2 per cent).² The political volatility in Cambodia, along with the turbulence in Thailand and sporadic tensions in Indonesia and Malaysia against their respective governments may also jeopardise the overall political stability of the region which may impede ASEAN's target of building the ASEAN Economic Community by 2015. Political steadiness is a pre-requisite for economic integration, opined, Kanit Sangsubhan, Director of the Fiscal Policy Research Institute Foundation of Thailand.³

It is important to gauge the international community's reactions to this emerging political trend in Southeast Asia. So far Cambodia is concerned the recent crisis may not evoke any harsh criticism against the government of Cambodia. Even during the turbulent time of 1997-1998 and the CPP-led coup in July 1997, Cambodia continued to receive assistance and grants from the international donors and foreign countries. So far, besides Surya Subedi, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Cambodia, who has called for negotiation and reforms of the NEC, European Parliament has suggested that the Cambodian government should accept an international investigation into the alleged election fraud of July 2013. The US has also condemned the violent attack on the garment workers by the government deployed forces.

On the other hand, in the case of Thailand, media reports from the US have supported the government led by Shinawatra and have urged the opposition leaders not to try to overthrow the legitimate government, elected by the rural Thais.⁴

The ongoing political protests against the long-established rules in the Southeast Asian countries are worth observing. It will be interesting to see how the situation will unfold now with Myanmar as the Chair of ASEAN and the stakes of China and the US in the region.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.

² Parameswaran, Parshanath (2014), "Southeast Asia: 10 Trends to watch for in 2014", The Diplomat, 8 January 2014, accessed on 25 March 2014, URL: <http://the-diplomat.com/2014/01/southeast-asia-to-watch-for-in-2014/>.

³ Bangkok Post, Political Risk Clouds Darken, 27 January 2014, [online] URL: <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/politics/391729/political-risk-clouds-darken>, [Accessed: 19 March 2014].

⁴ Cartalucci, Tony (2014), "South-East Asia Geopolitics and Washington's Creeping Front Against Thailand", Global Research, 19 January 2014, accessed 25 March 2014, URL: <http://www.globalresearch.ca/south-east-asia-geopolitics-washingtons-creeping-front-against-thailand/5365408>.