Questions for Southeast Asia

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From the Editor’s desk

Southeast Asia defies simple categorisation. Among its countries there are obvious contrasts: big and small, vibrant and stagnant, attractive and troubling, peaceful and unsettled, quaint and web-savvy, confronting and embracing. The contributors to this issue of the EAFQ grapple with parts of the Southeast Asian mosaic, punctuated, as ever, by domestic intrigues, national ambitions, and international engagements.

What ties the articles in this issue together, but never in a neat or seamless way, is the position of these countries, hemmed in by the much larger societies of China and India, and now forced to confront a world where ferocious technological and cultural change tests even the most effective governments. On the one hand—as a crossroads, a hub and a melting-pot—Southeast Asia is well-positioned to take advantage of its special geographical and social inheritance. On the other hand, the more than 500 million people of the region confront major challenges in the years ahead. There are many questions for Southeast Asia, and few easy answers.

Recent history shows just how unpredictable the prospects of particular countries are. At independence in 1948 Burma was considered to have a strong chance of succeeding. Instead, its post-independence history has seen great tragedy, and a continuing stalemate between pro-democracy forces and their military opponents. Indonesia has weathered its own torments and is now beginning to take advantage of new electoral vitality and increasing prosperity. Will that last? Thailand offers a cautious lesson; after a promising flirtation with democratic institutions, it now faces the challenge of establishing a new political and economic consensus in the waning years of King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s reign. In the other most populous countries of the region—Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia—political, economic and social debates are not settled. All are struggling to find answers to their own challenges.

Swirling above these country-specific preoccupations is the vexed matter of Southeast Asian regionalism itself. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations has become one of the world’s premier regional bodies. Can it continue to lead the region? Will it be properly resourced to tackle pressing issues of democratisation, terrorism, human-rights abuses, economic growth, social harmony and corruption? These remain tantalising questions for Southeast Asia as a whole.

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COVER PICTURE: Man of the moment. Students at a Jakarta primary school which Barack Obama attended during his childhood years in Indonesia reacted with delight on 5 November 2008 to news that the former pupil had been elected as the 44th President of the United States. Obama attended local schools in the Jakarta area between the ages of six and ten. He is scheduled to visit Indonesia later this year. Picture: BAY ISMOYO / AFP / Getty Images.

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CONFIDENCE AND CHALLENGES

ASEAN central to the region’s future

SURIN PITSUWAN

uring his visit to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Secretariat in Jakarta on 4 March 2010, Kofi Anan, former United Nations Secretary General, commended ASEAN for having regained its profile in the international arena. This profile is something that needs to be nurtured further.

The world wants ASEAN to achieve, and become even more successful, so that it has one less region to worry about. Last October there was an appeal for China and East Asia to pull the world away from the economic crisis.

As it transpired, the West asked us to pull the world out of the worst economic crisis since the Second World War. Their need for our support follows the realistic response to managing East Asia’s own financial crises over a decade ago. We have adjusted ourselves and are now more integrated, and resilient, than many had thought.

ASEAN+3, which includes China, Japan and Korea, was established because we realised that all of our countries require integration. It is important to remember that the economies of ASEAN itself are going to grow, even during these difficult times, at the rate of around 5 per cent this year.

Of course, economic crisis is not the only challenge for East Asia. There are also political and other non-traditional threats. The questions are: Can East Asia cope? Can ASEAN cope? Should we think about the Asia Pacific Community and East Asia Community? I don’t see these new formulations of regional architecture as a challenge, but as further recognition of the importance of our entire region.

So ASEAN needs to coordinate policies in any new regional architecture. In 1955, Asian and African Leaders gathered themselves at the Non-Aligned Movement Summit in Bandung. We realised back then that we, as individual states, needed to coexist peacefully. In 1967, after the signing of the Bangkok Declaration to establish ASEAN, the British Charge d’Affaires sent a telex to London, saying ‘These countries have failed before. We don’t have to give them anything. We already gave them English!’

Over the past 40 years we have developed a ‘workable diplomatic sculpture’ called ASEAN.

The experience of other regional groupings shows that they all have a strong core. The European Union has coal and steel cooperation. The North American Free Trade Area is centred around the United States—the strongest economy in the world. ASEAN is designed in the reverse. ASEAN has a rather loose core but draws on connectivity and dialogue to generate real partnership. Everybody is comfortable with us. We can claim that we gave rise to other configurations too: APEC, ASEm, ARF and the ASEAN+3.

This October, Australia and Russia will join ASEAN. We have also heard keen interest from the US and Russia about joining the East Asia Summit. United States Secretary of State Hilary Clinton asked me, ‘How much do you mean to implement the ASEAN Charter?’ I said, ‘We have to make it a living document. Much like your Declaration of Independence!’

We are not perfect but we can provide centrality and leadership to shape the regional landscape. We don’t want to be central by default but by strengthening our community. We are so diverse, and so different, and are dragged down by historical baggage.

ASEAN itself also has to change. We need to consolidate ourselves and integrate to be one market and production base. The core must be consolidated and integrated more effectively.
But as the world is watching, we are showing our responsibility. We have gained confidence.

The Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralisation is a good example, with a resource pool of US$120 billion. It is a good sign that East Asia is showing the way in helping our own people. To the collective resource, ASEAN contributes 20 per cent, the Republic of Korea contributes 20 per cent, while the remaining 60 per cent are for China and Japan to settle among themselves. They cannot settle because they don’t want the other to give more. This is a problem that other regions of the world may also want to have!

Beyond these changes, ASEAN has been enjoying evolutionary progress over the past 42 years. We want to continue this evolution. Disruption will trump cooperation if there is a sense that change is being externally imposed, just like in the past.

Of course, we welcome President Obama’s re-engagement with Asia. His planned trip to Indonesia is important and symbolic for all of us. He will notice that the region has moved forward in the last decade and these changes must shape US engagement with East Asia.

Like a ceremonial umbrella, which is not held straight overhead, the US has to be symbolically behind, not overwhelming, not imposing, but there to provide a sense of security, trust and confidence to the region. For that reason, the US has been playing that role of the umbrella but not quite above, as it did earlier during the Vietnam War. That sensitivity has to be taken very seriously. Then everybody can be comfortable and confident.

ASEAN itself also has to change. We need to consolidate ourselves and integrate to be one market and production base. The core must be consolidated and integrated more effectively.

With a combined GDP of US$1.6 trillion ASEAN is recognised around the world. The world knows that we will be good partner for them. ASEAN will provide centrality in any evolving architecture in this region.
G-20 POWER PLAY

Common causes: Obama in Indonesia and Australia

ANDREW MACINTYRE

United States President Barack Obama’s planned visit to Indonesia and Australia will be one of the less difficult and more gratifying international missions he will undertake this year. But along with the surges of goodwill that will greet him in both countries, there will also be opportunities—in partnership with Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Kevin Rudd—to advance significant common causes in the region and globally. And Yudhoyono’s separate bilateral visit to Canberra in March gave added weight to the diplomacy of 2010.

With climate change sliding down the agenda in all three countries for now, the big issue on which the three leaders find common cause is the G-20. A much more difficult issue—but important in different ways for each of them—is the challenge posed by China’s continued rise. Also flowing through the visits is consideration of the need for movement to enhance regional frameworks for multilateral cooperation.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Obama’s trip is the ‘diplomatic dots’ it invites us to connect. At least at this moment in history, there is potential for these three countries to begin coordinating their efforts in some policy areas. This is not a possibility that could have been given much serious attention previously.

The Obama visit to Indonesia has unusually strong symbolic qualities. In Indonesia the trip is being billed as Obama’s pulang kampung, or ‘home-coming.’ This is the most salient visit for ordinary Indonesians by any international leader in living memory. It is also likely to be the longest visit any US president has made to Indonesia in decades.

Even after his health care reform victory, Obama will want to bag some real gains to justify the political risk of being away from Washington while his first term agenda remains heavily contested. The emphasis should be on forging a new comprehensive partnership. This is good packaging. It plays to Indonesia’s desire to move up a level in world affairs; to get beyond aid and development assistance.

It also plays to Washington’s interest in forging stronger ties with key Asian countries in response to Beijing’s expanding influence.

More generally, what are the prospects for leveraging substantive results from the Jakarta-Washington relationship? Indonesia has made significant progress on the counter-terrorism front for some years. Can it now rise to a new level in the spheres of international economics and even international security more broadly?

The shared international economic agenda relates principally to the G-20. Indonesia (like Australia) can’t quite believe its good fortune at being part of the G-20. Under Yudhoyono’s liberal internationalist leadership, Jakarta is strongly motivated to support all moves to strengthen the G-20. But Indonesia ranks low among the twenty in terms of its ability to deliver consequential action. All the more so when the Indonesian President and his otherwise highly capable team of top economic aides are deeply enmeshed in a murky political crisis about a bank bailout. On the international economic front, rather than any direct policy action, it may be that the greatest value Jakarta may offer Washington is coordinated rhetorical support at the G-20 summit in Seoul later this year.

Surprisingly, there may be greater gains to be had from cooperation in the security sphere. For more than a decade the Leahy Act prohibiting the US from training military units with a history of human rights abuse has meant that security cooperation with Indonesia has been limited to police-based counter-terrorism efforts. Both sides now want to move beyond this. Driven by China’s growing regional weight, Obama seems prepared to

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go further than President Bush in finding ways to restart military-to-military engagement. There are signs his administration may seek to re-establish training programs with Indonesia’s controversial elite commando unit, Kopassus, by engaging with younger officers who could not have participated in past abuses. If so, this will be a major change.

While much of the fanfare will focus on the human interest side of Obama’s visit and major new American investment in educational and scholarship programs to help Indonesians study in the United States, the beginnings of a resumption of military cooperation between Jakarta and Washington may prove to be the most significant durable outcome of the visit.

Of course, Australia’s Prime Minister Rudd remains strongly committed to strengthening the institutional framework for regional cooperation in Asia. Explicit support from Washington would be helpful now in accelerating this cause. While the precise institutional form for achieving this outcome remains an open question, anything that enhances America’s ability to advance its core interests in Asia is likely to find favour with Obama. An upgrading of one or more of the existing pan-regional institutions is perhaps the most attainable option. Watch for coordinated advocacy from Obama, Yudhoyono and Rudd as a longer-term outcome of these visits.
ASEAN and American engagement in East Asia

DON EMMERSON

Former US Secretary of State Dean Acheson entitled his 1969 memoir Present at the Creation—the creation of a global order from the rubble of World War II. Joining or ignoring the East Asia Summit (EAS), some might say, is a comparably weighty choice—between being present or absent at the creation of an East Asian regional order in the wake of the Cold War.

The choice is conditioned by time and space. The East Asia Summit has been meeting without the United States since 2005. The Obama administration, unable to travel back in time to the Summit’s creation, can only be present or absent at its maturation.

Nor can the US play an insider’s part, the role of a local, in the growth of an East Asian regional order. Barring hilariously implausible continental drift, the US will never be an Asian country in geophysical terms. Washington can speed (or impede) East Asian integration, but only from a distance, never as a denizen.

That said, the political meaning of East Asia has already been blurred. In 1995 Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed scoffed at the inclusion of ‘white’ Australia and New Zealand in the ‘East Asian Hemisphere’ proposed by Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans. But Evans had the last laugh a decade later when, alongside China, Japan, and South Korea, Australia was seated at the First East Asia Summit—convened,
ironically, in Malaysia’s own capital, Kuala Lumpur. India and New Zealand were also present at the creation of the EAS, despite their respectively South Asian and Australasian locations.

Notwithstanding these six additions, the ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) formed and still form the core of the Summit. The Association invented the EAS, sets its agenda, and requires it to meet annually inside Southeast Asia in conjunction with ASEAN’s own summit. All of the criteria for joining the EAS were determined by and linked to the association: A country cannot join the EAS unless it has first acceded to the ‘ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia,’ been formally recognised by ASEAN as a ‘dialogue partner,’ and established a record of substantial cooperative relations with ASEAN.

The US meets these criteria, but doing so does not guarantee admission. In a further illustration of ASEAN’s centrality, it is the association’s ten governments—not the summit’s six non-Southeast Asian members—who must unanimously agree to accept or reject a request to join the EAS.

No Southeast Asian government has said publicly that it would oppose, and several have informally encouraged, an American application. China may not welcome US membership. But an open campaign by Beijing to keep the Americans out would risk offending those ASEAN members who want the US inside the EAS and confirming Southeast Asian fears of China’s hegemonic intentions.

Besides, the profile and activities of the EAS pale by comparison with those of another forum, ASEAN + 3, which already includes China (along with Japan and South Korea) and fosters cooperation within a conventionally East Asian frame.

There is no evidence that the US either wants or would be allowed to join ASEAN + 3 and make it ASEAN + 4. That framework does not include a few plausibly ‘East Asian’ entities such as Mongolia, North Korea, and Taiwan. But its thirteen members all fit the consensus definition of East Asia as a composite of Southeast and Northeast Asia. No other regional arrangement is more patently East Asian in character.

Ironically, the EAS lays claim to ‘East Asia’ in its very name, whereas ‘Plus Three’ in the ASEAN framework could in theory refer to Ghana, Chile, and Iceland, or any trio of states. Nevertheless, of the two frameworks, it is ASEAN + 3 that has a far better chance of evolving into a delimited ‘East Asian Community’ as opposed to an amorphously ‘Asia-Pacific’ one. If China wants to lead East Asia, it does not need the East Asia Summit as a vehicle for doing so. This could be one reason why Beijing is unlikely to campaign openly against US membership of the EAS.

Whereas China is in both the EAS and ASEAN + 3, India and Australia belong only to the EAS. Because of this difference, New Delhi and Canberra are more likely than Beijing to view the EAS as a prototypical Asian community. The position of Japan is less clear. Like China, it is a full participant in both frameworks but, unlike China, it is an intimate security partner of the United States. The new Hatoyama government in Tokyo is unlikely to endanger that trans-Pacific assurance. Yet Tokyo would think twice before championing US membership in the EAS if doing so were construed in Asia as merely a ploy to help Washington encircle ASEAN + 3 and thereby prevent it from monopolising East Asian regionalism on behalf of Beijing.

If Washington is waiting for an invitation to join the EAS, so is Moscow, and their prospects may be linked. Russia attended the inaugural EAS in 2005 in Kuala Lumpur, but only as a guest invited by the Malaysian host, and has been trying to become a member of the summit ever since. If and when ASEAN does take up the suitability of American affiliation, voices may well be raised on behalf of letting Russia in as well. Among several possible motives for linking the two accessions is the notion that by making the EAS even more diverse, it will become even less effective, and thus leave unchallenged the claim of ASEAN + 3 to represent East Asia.

As long as these uncertainties remain unresolved, the political shape of East Asia will remain, for better or worse, unfinished business.

A longer version of this article can be found at: http://www.rsis.edu.sg/publications/workingpapers/wp193.pdf
Indonesia, the region and the world

DEWI FORTUNA ANWAR

The visit by United States President Barack Obama to Indonesia later in 2010 will undoubtedly put Indonesia in the limelight. Obama's visit is seen by many as recognition of Indonesia's international standing as the largest country in Southeast Asia, the largest Muslim majority nation, the world's third-largest democracy, and one of the world's 20 largest economies. Much was also made of Hillary Clinton's visit, which made Indonesia the second country that she visited after being appointed as the US Secretary of State in early 2009. Recently, a number of Indonesian and foreign observers have noted Indonesia's return to regional and international activism after a period of crippling domestic crises.

It is sometimes said that Indonesia is the most important country that the world knows least about. For the most part this is due to the style of foreign policy implemented throughout Suharto’s more than 30-year rule. In response to President Sukarno’s ‘lighthouse’ foreign policy in which Indonesia strutted as the global spokesman for newly independent nations, and confronted the Western colonialist-imperialist powers, Suharto pursued the opposite course. Indonesian foreign policy under Suharto was deliberately low profile, narrowly focused on peace and stability in Southeast Asia, and designed to bring direct economic benefits to Indonesia.

Though trade and investment. While mostly successful in its immediate development objectives, Indonesia lost its profile in the international arena, even though it was still recognised as first among equals within ASEAN.

Indonesia, supported by the major Western powers during the Cold War as a staunch anti-communist bulwark, was mostly known to the wider international community for its holiday resorts in Bali, and for its military occupation of East Timor. The end of Suharto’s rule was followed by incessant news of riots, communal conflicts, regional insurgencies, religious extremism and terrorist bomb attacks. For many people not familiar with the country these events summed up Indonesia: an unfamiliar and dangerous place.

Today a successful democracy has replaced Suharto’s authoritarian regime. The economy is recovering from the global crisis, and Indonesia’s status as the world’s largest Muslim majority nation with a predominantly moderate brand of Islam has suddenly become an asset. The international community, and especially the West, now has a higher expectation of the country. In a global climate marred by Islamic religious extremism and threats of terrorism, Indonesia, with its claim as a country in which Islam, democracy and modernity go hand-in-hand, is seen as a credible force of moderation.

Within ASEAN, Indonesia’s resurgence has been welcomed with both anticipation and unease. A revitalised Indonesia clearly helps to reinvigorate ASEAN, but an Indonesia that is strident about democracy and human rights is very different from the familiar champion of the ‘ASEAN Way’ which upheld the principle of strict non-interference in each country’s internal affairs. Indonesia has also been basking in international attention, exemplified by the forthcoming visit of President Barack Obama.

PICTURE: BERYL BERNAY
Terrorism today: Jemaah Islamiyah, Dulmatin and the Aceh cell

GREG FEALY

Terrorism has again dominated headlines in Indonesia over recent months. On 22 February 2010, police raided a terrorist training camp in the mountains of Aceh, leading to the deaths of three mobile brigade officers and one terrorist. Over the next three weeks another seven terrorists were shot dead by police and 40 others have been arrested in Aceh, Jakarta and Banten, on the western tip of Java. The most prominent of those killed was Dulmatin, whom police suspect was leading the network supporting the Aceh terrorist cell.

Dulmatin was the most wanted of the remaining fugitive Bali bombers and the United States government had posted a dead-or-alive $US10 million bounty on his head, by far the highest reward for any Indonesian terrorist. Police have since revealed that the Aceh cell contained at least 40 people and they believe another 30 or so were part of the broader support network. One of those whom police are pursuing is Umar Patek, a close associate of Dulmatin and another member of the 2002 Bali bombing operation, who is thought to have been involved with the Aceh cell. Patek has a $US1 million reward for his capture.

These developments are significant for a number of reasons. First, Aceh, despite its long and bloody separatist insurgency between the late 1970s and 2005, has not previously been a site of Islamist terrorism. Indeed, earlier attempts by Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and other jihadist groups to cultivate relations with Acehnese insurgents had been rebuffed, and the province was regarded as a hostile site for recruitment and training. The emergence of this terrorist cell in Aceh, which reportedly was formed in late 2009, represents a disturbing development in a province which has been largely peaceful since the 2005 peace agreement.

Second, police have blamed JI for the formation of this cell. The National Police Chief, Bambang Hendarso Danuri, for example, stated: ‘It [the terrorist cell] is purely Jemaah Islamiyah. The network is up to something in Aceh’ (Jakarta Globe, 17 March 2010). This emphatic linking of JI to the Aceh cell is surprising given that, in recent years, most terrorism analysts (and seemingly the Indonesian police, as well) have concluded that JI itself is no longer directly engaged in terrorist activities and that all the major bombings since 2004 have been the work of a JI splinter group led by the Malaysian Noordin Mohammad Top, which is operating without the knowledge or approval of JI’s board. Moreover, sections of the media have reported that Dulmatin returned to Indonesia from his refuge in the southern Philippines in early 2009 and had been given protection by JI’s central leadership to initiate new jihadist operations in Indonesia (Jawa Pos, 11 March 2010).

So why has Aceh suddenly emerged as a terrorist site, and has JI indeed returned to active terrorism? It is

Obama and invitations to participate in various prestigious forums, such as the 2007 Annapolis conference on Palestine and, most important of all, membership in the new grouping of the world economic powerhouses, the G-20. Indonesia is currently the only Southeast Asian member of the G-20.

Now calls have become much louder for Indonesia to once again walk tall on the world stage, to play a role as a peace-broker in various international conflicts, to act as an interlocutor in the dialogue between the Muslim world and the West, to be a spokesman for developing countries in the G-20, and to drive ASEAN to respect democracy and human rights.

At the same time, Suharto’s legacy of a more narrowly focused foreign policy aimed at obtaining concrete outcomes for Indonesia’s economic development, given that Indonesia is still a relatively poor country, is equally influential. Many have argued that Indonesia’s first priority must be to improve the livelihoods of the people and its foreign policy must, first and foremost, be aimed at achieving economic benefits for Indonesia. It is also argued that Indonesia should get its house in order first, including improving its own democracy and governance, before it tries to promote democracy and human rights elsewhere.

The push and pull between a Sukarno-style ‘lighthouse’ international stance and a more pragmatic, economically-focussed effort will likely mark the course of Indonesia’s foreign policy in the years ahead. Which trend will prevail is likely to be determined by the dynamics of internal politics as competing actors seek to influence the formulation and implementation of a foreign policy which can no longer be decided behind closed doors.
too early to answer either question categorically, as information about the Aceh cell and Dulmatin’s role remains patchy and sometimes contradictory.

With regard to the ‘why Aceh and why now?’ questions, some provisional responses can be ventured. Those arrested in Aceh for involvement in this cell come from various backgrounds. Some were long-standing jihadists who had been involved in other terrorist actions. The Java-based Darul Islam-affiliated group known as the Banten Ring is one such important source of cell members. The Ring’s leader, Kang Jaja, was one of those shot dead by police in Aceh, and his brother Saptono is seen as a possible leader of the cell. The Banten Ring has for many years provided a pool of recruits for suicide bombings by JI and Noordin network members, though it remains organisationally separate from both groups. Others in the Aceh cell were disaffected local officials and former Free Aceh Movement (GAM) fighters. Their disaffection has two elements: anger at economic marginalisation and exclusion from the rewards of power that have flowed to former GAM leaders after the peace deal; and disapproval of the provincial government’s reluctance to implement comprehensively sharia law. It is likely that the hardened jihadists sought to radicalise these Acehnese and encourage them to see their struggle as part of a broader war against the enemies of Islam, particularly the thoghtu (infidel-serving) governments of Aceh and Indonesia.

This combining of hardened jihadists with local radical groups to create new terrorist cells has a number of precedents in recent years, the most notable being the so-called Palembang group in South Sumatra, which had planned to bomb a café frequented by Westerners. They were eventually discovered and arrested by the police. The Palembang group comprised mainly local members of an anti-Christianisation movement who were cultivated by a few members of the Noordin network and trained in bomb-making and covert operations.

This brings us to the issue of JI’s involvement. It is clear that the Indonesian police are incorrect to state that this is a ‘purely Jemaah Islamiyah’ operation. The presence of Darul Islam jihadists and former GAM troops proves this. But does the involvement of Dulmatin and Umar Patek, both sworn JI members, put that organisation at the heart of this terrorist operation? In other words, although the Aceh cell may not be exclusively JI’s, was that organisation central to its existence? The answer to this remains unclear at this stage. Most available evidence suggests that Dulmatin and Umar Patek had been operating outside the command structure of JI for about six years, though Umar Patek may still consider himself part of the JI community. If the JI leadership did indeed protect Dulmatin and Patek and allow them to mount terrorist operations, it would contradict much of what we know about JI’s recent attitudes to bombings and other kinds of terrorist attacks. Since 2003, JI appears to have been led by jihadists who believe that bombings against civilians and Westerners have been counterproductive to the organisation and its central objective of creating an Islamic state in Indonesia. Hence, they have sought to prevent members from joining further Bali bombing-style attacks. This is not to rule out the possibility of JI complicity, but rather to say there are grounds for scepticism.

The indications are that Dulmatin was indeed heavily involved in this operation and he is known to have remained committed to militant jihadism while in the Philippines. He was quite capable of using non-JI jihadist networks for launching the Aceh cell. The apparent speed with which Dulmatin and his associates were able to form a lethal terrorist group in Aceh, which had the capacity to inflict such heavy casualties on the police, is further evidence that violent jihadism in Indonesia is capable of taking new forms and drawing on hitherto non-jihadi communities in mounting operations.
The unstoppable red shirts

THITINAN PONGSUDHIRAK

The red shirt uprising in Bangkok has brought Thailand’s topsyturvy politics to a critical juncture as brinksmanship and confrontation intensify. Since early 2009, many tens of thousands of red shirts, nominally under the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) and supportive of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, have agitated and mobilised against the coalition government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva. After rioting in the streets and retreating in disgrace in April 2009, they regrouped and reclaimed their agenda with street protests in Bangkok in March and April 2010, calling for a dissolution of the lower house and new polls to reboot Thailand’s democratic game.

As the reds ramped up their rhetoric and street demonstrations, their demands for a dissolution of the lower house were set against the defiance and resolve of Prime Minister Abhisit and his patrons and allies. Negotiations were brokered but nothing is likely to come of them unless Abhisit relents. The pro-Abhisit royalist-conservative coalition of army officers, palace insiders, ruling coalition parties, the ‘yellow’ People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD), and Bangkok’s co-opted civil society and home- and car-owning middle classes, have closed ranks and hunkered down for a long battle of attrition. That coalition seems aware that new polls will only lead to red shirt victory and a return of their government as seen in 2008, even though their Puea Thai party is a third-rate successor to the original Thai Rak Thai party. And this time the reds would be unlikely to allow the PAD yellows to hijack their mandate, as in 2008. Clinging to power under the status quo is the pro-Abhisit coalition’s muddling way forward.

The odds have now stacked against the reds. They can protest until they are hoarse but are unlikely to get their way as long as the pro-Abhisit and anti-Thaksin coalition stands its ground. But Abhisit and his backers are mistaken in their belief that the reds can be whittled down into pacification and submission. That they have re-emerged for more mass demonstrations in Bangkok less than a year after defeat suggests deep-seated red sympathies in the rural north and northeast, where traditional passivity was shaken by former Prime Minister Thaksin’s brand of populism and sense of upward mobility for the neglected masses.

This time the reds have enjoyed limited but unprecedented traction in the capital. The rural downtrodden have been joined by Bangkok’s underclass, the sympathetic menial workers and service providers who hail from upcountry. Some Bangkokians with a conscience of what is not right in Thailand have also shown significant support. The reds have increasingly transcended Thaksin, and even eclipsed the UDD organisers in their commitment to political change and for the opportunities they glimpsed during the Thaksin years in 2001-2006.

To be sure, Thaksin’s corruption and abuse of power are now naked, proven in legal convictions and assets confiscation. The reds acknowledge his errors but tend to dismiss them as par for the course in Thai politics. Abhisit’s patrons and allies are deliberately fixated on Thaksin’s corruption because they do not want to confront the implications of the reds’ demands and grievances. These disenchantments point to a nascent order in Thailand that can only be detrimental to establishment status and vested interests. Their resistance to change stands in the way of future reforms in their constitutional monarchy but it must be reformed and refitted to meet the demands and expectations of a democratised society.

The vast majority of Thais still want to preserve their constitutional monarchy but it must be reformed and refitted to meet the demands and expectations of a democratised society.
reconciliation where Thailand's constitutional monarchy will have to own up to a democratic reality in which victorious voters will not let their voices be denied. The hard truth and trial by experience in Thailand have shown that a strong monarchy is ultimately not compatible with a strong democracy. Navigating ways to reconcile the two and settle in a new consensual equilibrium underlines the protracted confrontation between reds and yellows.

The reds have upped the ante with their growing calls for new elections but they cannot dislodge the government as long as Abhisit's coalition remains intact. As the Abhisit government's symbiotic relationship with the army is laid bare, underscored by the prime minister's periodic refuge in the barracks, the pro-Abhisit coalition will not give up without a fight.

Nor will the reds disband without palpable concessions. Something will have to give. The culmination of this brinksmanship may well disadvantage the reds in the near term. But each time they are dispersed and return for more, Thailand moves closer to a less favourable outcome for its constitutional monarchy that plays into the hands of a growing republican fringe. The vast majority of Thais still want to preserve their constitutional monarchy but it must be reformed and refitted to meet the demands and expectations of a democratised society.

The establishment forces behind Prime Minister Abhisit are understandably insecure and fearful of change because it can be slippery. Concessions and reforms may know no bounds. But playing this democratic game in a winner-takes-all fashion may mean that they end up with little left at the end of the day.

KEVIN HEWISON

Anyone with even a passing interest in Thailand knows that there was a military coup in September 2006. The coup was meant to end the political domination of telecommunications tycoon and former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra who had won the two largest electoral victories in Thai history. The coup punctuated a period of political turmoil that began in 2005 and continues to this day.

Some commentators agree that this period of turmoil marks a political or cultural turning point. It is not unusual to hear laments that Thailand is now somehow ‘different’, with a politics that is more conflicted than in the past. It is sometimes claimed that the Thai ability to compromise is now gone. This position seeks explanations of Thailand's politics in the deep recesses of something called ‘Thai culture’. Not only is this a misleading perspective that ignores a long history of political struggle, but it ignores the ideological nature of claims about ‘Thai culture.’

More than anything else, such conservative claims mystify Thailand’s power structures. This perspective conceives Thais as having been essentially apolitical, drawn to Buddhist middle paths, making them compromisers and even fatalistic in political outlook. From this perspective, when politics matters it is handled through a pyramid of patron-client relations that have an apex in the monarchy. The king is said to be the ultimate ‘good man’ who understands and protects his people. Indeed, he can be relied upon as a great figure above politics. It is this ‘Thai culture’ which is believed to be unravelling as political conflict deepens.

In fact, this so-called culture derives from a social and political order that has long been hierarchical and repressive. This order has for decades been opposed in cycles of occasional rebellion and continual and quieter forms of political opposition. Rebellions have arisen intermittently over more than seven decades, from the 1932 overthrow of the absolute monarchy, to the 1973 student-led uprising and the civilian challenge to the military’s 1992 attempt to control Thailand’s political future, to the current red shirt movement.

Usually derisively described in the mainstream media as ‘pro-Thaksin,’ in fact the red shirt movement draws on deeply-held feelings that the current social order is unfair. In a society that official figures...
show is highly unequal in terms of income, wealth, land ownership and opportunity, the red shirts have increasingly proclaimed Thai society unfair, unequal and unjust. The result is a red shirt movement that is class-based and regionalised and inherently heterogeneous in membership and leadership. Its emotive campaigns challenge established hierarchies that are founded in the very inequality red shirts oppose. This makes for a movement that is detested and feared by an essentially Bangkok-based establishment.

The red shirts are not without divisions and problems. Some long for a return by former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, a corrupt politician and deeply flawed leader, but one who came to be seen as having a desire to help the downtrodden. Others are politically naïve and still others continue to build a money-based politics. Despite all of this, the rise of the red shirts represents one of those brief periods of subaltern rebellion that goes beyond forms of everyday resistance that rarely offer fundamental challenges to the established order.

This overt challenge has unsettled the ruling elite. They oppose it through the state’s repressive forces while reasserting their rule as natural and culturally Thai. The ideological affirmation of the right to rule draws on deeply conservative conceptions of order, authority and morals. Significantly, conservative royalism crystallised as a political ideology during a period of harsh and despotic military authoritarianism in the late 1950s.

As a starting point, this conservative royalism is an ideology that rejects Western-style democracy as inappropriate for a Thai society that is considered culturally amenable to strong authority figures who unify the nation while upholding Buddhist-based moral principles. The rural base of society is considered a cultural heartland that reveres and maintains traditional institutions. Real representation is not to be found in ‘Western-style’ liberal ideas about elections and democracy but in a leadership that guarantees ‘democracy’ through patriarchal and hierarchical ‘representation’ and moral correctness, even without elections.

These conservative ideas initially underpinned a military dictatorship but were also the basis for the
revival of the royalism that is now the locus of red shirt criticisms of the king’s Privy Council and, more circumspectly, of the monarchy itself. Royalist ideas were promoted by several well-known ideologues, including Kukrit Pramoj, who asserted a ‘Thai-style’ of government that brought order, peace, security and progress but was vehemently anti-liberal and anti-democratic. In this system, the role of the king was constructed in terms of benevolent and moral leadership, as a protector of the people. In this form, the monarch is portrayed as a moral check and balance on government. Only leaders who displayed the utmost respect to and loyalty for the king could be ‘good’ for the country.

At the heart of this royalist ideology is a benevolent paternalism that insists that the monarchy is indispensable for the peace, prosperity and stability of the nation and the well-being of the people. At the same time, the elite that runs the country under the king’s unquestionable moral authority and great wisdom is supposedly destined to rule. This axis of moral authority between monarch and political leaders is said to be tempered by Buddhist principles that limit absolute power. It is this system that is said to have held sway in Thailand for some 700 years. In this context, those commentators who pine for a Thailand of yore essentially accept a conservative royalist ideology that is inherently anti-democratic.

Since the 2006 coup, conservative royalism has been reinvigorated and endlessly emphasised. The deluge of royalist propaganda is unrelenting, most especially on television, but in all the recesses of the media and official institutions, including schools. On many television stations, the portion of the evening news dedicated to the display of public royal activities is now often longer in duration than the national and international news combined. The claims made regarding royal skill, expertise and knowledge have become increasingly fantastic as various royals are showered with honorary doctorates and other awards. Government ministers, judges, senior diplomats and many more must now publicly display their veneration of the monarchy and subservience to the king and other royals.

In terms of politics, the conservative and anti-liberal principles that underpin these royalist ideas were not only a stimulus for the military’s coup in 2006—where the junta claimed Thaksin had not shown the right veneration for the monarchy—but buttress the military’s 2007 Constitution. The changes in the constitution have seen an increase in the power of senior state officials, an emphasis on appointment rather than election and a substantial effort to reinvigorate the capacity of the Ministry of Interior, the military and various security agencies to control the population. Several other junta-era laws have strengthened the military, vastly increasing its budget and providing it with the capacity to...
interact in a vast range of social and political affairs.

Conservative royalism has been vigorously policed. Several people have been locked up for long prison terms on the political charge of insulting the monarchy and no one knows exactly how many have been charged with lèse majesté or under provisions of the post-coup Computer Crimes Act. Cyber police actively work to censor web-based attacks on the monarchy and their work now totals tens of thousands of blocked pages. More importantly, the culture of deference and adulation, combined with a constant dialogue that suggests the monarchy is threatened by evil forces, creates considerable fear and inevitable self-censorship.

The red shirts carefully contest this royalist ideology by directing their attacks at members of the Privy Council and at a broader power elite they call amart. This is also why their rhetoric emphasises fairness, equality and justice. The red shirts know that direct political challenges to royalism are complicated by the uncertainties associated with royal succession and the power of a government that owes its position to the military brass and support from senior palace officials.

Even if their rebellion is short-lived or defeated, the red shirts will not have contested the power of the establishment in vain. Their campaigns and protests have re-embedded ideas about fairness, equality and justice in the Thai political milieu in a manner that ensures that the ruling elite and, indeed, the monarchy can never again believe that Thailand is exclusively theirs. Even if the establishment prevails, they will always be looking over their shoulders for the next rising of the red shirts or a new rebellion that demands a fairer and more just Thailand.

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GETTING THE FACTS

Reporting from Thailand’s political front lines

NICK NOSTITZ

On 25 October 2009 I went to northeast Thailand, this time to the village of Nong Wua So, about 40 kilometres outside the city of Udon Thani, to observe a red shirt rally: village-style. When I arrived in the early afternoon the action had not yet begun. Soon after, many people began arriving from surrounding villages. Around the rim of the rally area were food stalls, and several large trampolines where children jumped around for a few baht each. Kwanchai Paipanna, the charismatic leader of the udon lovers, a local red shirt group, and organiser of the rally, was already there, sitting in a tent close to the stage. He talked with red shirts and police officers. A high-ranking officer asked Kwanchai to accompany him to visit the abbot at a famous local temple. I was invited too. Several police officers and red shirt guards came along. Inside, the abbot blessed the rally, and presented us with rare amulets. One of the guards said to me, with a huge smile, that he had wanted this particular amulet for a long time.

By sunset the rally site quickly filled with 2000 to 3000 red shirts. Entire families arrived. Local politicians spoke on the stage, Kwanchai made his points, and even exiled former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra made a phone-in. There were Look Thung and Mor Lam singers belting out their peculiar mix of folk pop, accompanied by Hang Kueang—the scantily dressed dancers so typical of provincial concerts.

The following day we went to Ubon Ratchatani, a few hours south of Udon Thani. Kwanchai Paipanna was driven by a huge police officer who served as his driver and bodyguard. While driving he kept his gun next to his seat. In a slightly derelict resort, about an hour away outside town, a conference of local red shirt leaders from all over the northeast took place. The hosts were singer-turned-politician Arisman Pongruangrong and Suporn ‘Rambo Isaarn’ Attawong, a former Khorat Member of Parliament under the deposed Thai Rak Thai government.
Kurt Pelda, correspondent of the Swiss Neue Zürcher Zeitung, and I were the only journalists in attendance. Nobody else was paying much attention.

More recently, on 30 January 2010, a red shirt rally in Khonkaen had more than 100,000 protesters, and the following day an event in Ubon Ratchathani drew between 50,000 and 60,000 red shirts. These events were not reported by the Thai mainstream media; not on television or in the newspapers. Only Nirmal Ghosh from Singapore’s Straits Times and Marvaan Makan Makar from IPS wrote about the events when they found out about them; their reports led to many discussions in the Thai political blogosphere.

Today I don’t even remember how many ‘small’ red shirt events, such as fundraisers for community radio stations, and concerts I have photographed where I was the only independent journalist present.

Late in 2005 and throughout 2006, until the military coup, the situation was quite different. Every People’s Alliance for Democracy (that is ‘yellow shirt’) event was covered by dozens of journalists, both local and international, both employed and freelance. But it was already apparent way back then that discrepancies between reporting and reality existed. Most international journalists hung on the lips of yellow shirt leader Sondhi Limthongkul’s masterfully prepared media sound bites about corruption and democracy yet ignored the extreme nationalism expressed on stage.

Not too many journalists made their way to the pro-Thaksin camp at Chatuchak Park in Bangkok. These government supporters were mostly portrayed as hired stooges, absent of political conviction. There is no
doubt that many such opportunists were around — at the time I had friends from my neighborhood who used the camp as a welcome source of easy income. Nevertheless, many others, especially those who travelled to Bangkok from distant villages on their small tractors, argued quite convincingly why they supported Thaksin. The reasons cited were more or less the same as today: they appreciated the many programs aimed at connecting their villages to Thailand’s economy. These are the same policies that were widely denounced as ‘populist’ in the lead-up to the 2006 coup.

After that coup, and especially when it became clear that no blood was shed, the international media soon lost interest. I remember the largely unreported early anti-coup protests at Sanam Luang, the expanse in front of Bangkok’s Grand Palace. The crowds they drew were sometimes a few hundred protesters. But their protests grew and then culminated in the post-coup period with the clashes at the residential compound of the Privy Council Chairman, General Prem Tinsulanonda. At that time there were only five foreign journalists, including me, who were present and witnessed parts of the clashes.

Generally speaking, the media as a whole, with few exceptions, completely missed the beginning of what may turn out to be the most important recent change in the Thai socio-political landscape. The quality of reporting on the red shirts still suffers from this oversight. There are, of course, reasons for this. The local media is under subtle but strong pressure. Several local journalists have told me that they would love to be able to work the way I do, and write what I write. They have said that if they did, they would be attacked as red shirt supporters, which would have serious consequences for their professional future. Not many local journalists are in the position of Pravit Rojanaphruk from The Nation, who, as an Oxford graduate from a good family, can afford to write according to his conscience and the facts he gathers.

For Western journalists the situation differs in some important ways. Simply, there is no money in Thai political reporting. If you cover the conflict in depth, I’d advise you to forget about earning a proper income. Western media, already in crisis with tremendous budget cuts, will not spend any money on Thailand’s problems while there are much larger stories such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Britney Spears’ mental state. Larger networks have tried to report as well as they can, especially Al-Jazeera and the BBC, but when there is little space available for such coverage, there will be only a small budget to go around.

The academic world has similarly ignored the red shirt movement, and to a large degree still does. There has been no long term field study done on the red shirts, and only now are there a few students, mostly foreign, who are researching the movement. Thai students—the few who care—are often cowed by the mostly yellow shirt academic establishment.

In contrast, the blogosphere is very much alive. Most valuable reporting is done on blogs. The natural problem is that blogs have little peer review, are often anonymous, and at times openly side with this or the other political faction. Even the few respected blogs such as New Mandala and Bangkok Pundit, and the critical news website Prachatai, are often discredited along those lines.

The few people who do report on the ground, and publish without a shield of anonymity, have to acquire a very thick skin. I was accused of being bribed by former Prime Minister Thaksin with a very large amount of money, for example, because of what I reported about the 7 October 2008 clash at Government House between police and yellow shirts, first published by New Mandala. My report contradicted the official version of events but it was soon translated and taken up by the Thai media. Jonathan Head, the former BBC correspondent in Thailand, ended up earning several lèse majesté charges for his reporting. Some Thai journalists have even been physically attacked by members of both the red and yellow shirt movements, angered by the blinkered reporting by the Thai media.

Taken together this has led to a vacuum in knowledge about Thailand’s ongoing political battles, and wider socio-political conflicts in Thailand. Almost every aspect of red shirt grassroots support in the provinces and Bangkok remains unstudied. Even the fact that there is ideological grassroots support is still highly disputed. How is it possible to analyse future developments and potentially fundamental changes in Thai society when elementary aspects go unstudied and unreported?
No longer the capital:
Yangon today

THOMAS KEAN

There’s a saying in Myanmar that, roughly translated, says you go to Mawlamyine for food, Mandalay for conversation and Yangon to show off. Poor Yangon.

Since the military shifted the seat of government to newly constructed Naypyidaw in late 2005, the city cannot even be described as the top place to display ill-gotten wealth anymore. Many of its crumbling colonial and towering Chinese-style mansions now lie vacant, their owners summoned to the new capital, and the long government motorcades that were once an everyday annoyance are now a rare sight.

Set on the arid plains of upper Myanmar, Naypyidaw has been a significant drain on the country’s finances and is estimated to have cost at least $US$4 billion. Nowhere has the effect been felt more than in Yangon, where potted roads, blackouts and weeds growing from old government offices speak of the deliberate neglect that is taking place.

The present military rulers have always been ambivalent about this ‘foreign’ city, which was little more than a village when the British established it as the capital of lower Burma after the Second Anglo-Burmese War in the 1850s.

The shift north owes more to strategy and tradition than the oft-cited astrological motives. Naypyidaw is centrally located and in the traditional heartland of Burmese kings. It’s also far away from the two main perceived threats to military rule and, in the words of the generals, most likely causes of ‘disintegration of the Union’: foreign invasion and popular uprising.

Under the 2008 constitution, the 440-member Pyithu Hluttaw, or House of Representatives, must convene within 90 days of the general election, scheduled for sometime later this year. Both elected and appointed delegates—25 per cent of seats are reserved for military candidates—will meet in a 31-building parliament complex which should be completed by the end of May.

That first session, marking the country’s return to democracy after 48 years of military rule, will be another indicator of Yangon’s demise. But it is precisely because of the city’s faults in the eyes of the generals—its foreignness, population base and location—that it will continue to be the country’s most important urban area.

The shift to Naypyidaw has found little acceptance, both locally and internationally. Government staff forced to move have done so only reluctantly, and local businesses, outside of the construction industry, still see few opportunities there at present.

Only a handful of embassies—the Chinese and the North Koreans—have moved north, while the United Nations continues to be scattered across Yangon. When the UN began looking for a large office space late last year to integrate its agencies, there was little discussion of the possibility of transferring to the new capital.

With no international flights to Naypyidaw, Yangon remains the centre of international trade. Its five million residents represent the largest consumer market and the country’s primary port, at Thilawa, is just 25 kilometres away, as are most of Myanmar’s industrial zones. If the much-anticipated law permitting Special Economic Zones, modelled on the Pearl River Delta, is finally introduced, Thilawa would be the mostly likely location for these, providing a much-needed boost to employment.

Much of what remains of the country’s human capital is based in Yangon and it continues to be the most vibrant city in Myanmar, the only one that could even remotely be called

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**Burma or Myanmar?**

The Union of Myanmar is the official name of the country still widely known as Burma. Internationally, and as a reflection of Burma/Myanmar’s contentious politics, the names are used inconsistently and interchangeably; just as they are in this issue of the EAFQ.

On linguistic, historical, political and protocol grounds, advocates of a specific usage offer strong reasons for their choice of presentation. The EAFQ has opted to retain each author’s original usage.
There are also signs that the decline in fortunes in recent years will soon reverse. The elections might be the sham that many in the international community expect, but the spectre of polls has at least forced the military regime to reconsider its priorities. More emphasis is now being put on delivering services to appease voters in the lead-up to polling day.

One of the main gripes in Yangon, the city most susceptible to political unrest, is the lack of electricity; the government supplies only 300 megawatts a day, less than half of the estimated demand. Some neighbourhoods receive less than eight hours of power a day, while most get no more than 12. As a consequence, businesses and households rely heavily on generators fuelled by subsidised diesel—or simply go without.

A new natural gas pipeline from the Yadana offshore field—operated by French company Total—should help alleviate the power outages. At an estimated cost of $US270 million, the pipeline project is a rare display of government largesse in lower Myanmar, and should conveniently come online in the third quarter of 2010.

While the city is now more of a transit point for up-country travel (with a brief stop-off at Shwedagon Pagoda, of course), with more investment in a wider range of accommodation and a revitalisation of the city’s colonial districts, it could become a tourist destination in its own right.

But the greatest hope for the city’s future perhaps lies in the possibility of a post-election business revival. Economic development and opportunities are shaping up as the crucial election issues, and among the first acts of the new, mostly civilian government should be sweeping economic reforms that make the country a more attractive place for foreign investment, both large- and small-scale.

If this happens, Yangon could be transformed from a crumbling colonial relic to the fulcrum of Myanmar’s reintegration into the global economy.

Demolition in progress in Yangon. Although the former capital has suffered from the shift of political power to the north, tourism investments and the prospect of a revitalised business sector after elections raise the prospect of a more vibrant future for the city.
Burma’s ‘Saffron Revolution’ marks its two-and-a-half year anniversary as the country anticipates national elections this year. The monks’ 2007 protests represented the most serious threat to military rule since the 1988 uprising.

Since then the regime has continued to assert control over monks by issuing them colour-coded identity cards. Stricter travel policies for monks have been imposed. Monks travelling or residing outside Burma have had their visas revoked or extensions terminated, while monks may not travel even for a day trip without first filing a request at their local ward-level government office. Curfews are still in effect for many monasteries and in some cases monks may not go on alms rounds without government permission or surveillance.

The regime continues to outlaw the chanting of metta (loving-kindness) in public. Certain religious discourses—those deemed to be indirect critiques of the regime, such as describing the qualities of good kings or the conditions for the decline of the religion—have also been banned. Monks must ask permission to give public discourses. In Mandalay in December 2009, the Mahanayaka state monks committee issued a ban on posters advertising religious talks by monks. The junta continues to use the officially sanctioned and carefully culled state monks association to enforce policies on the Buddhist order, or Sangha. This deployment of monks aligned with military authorities has created fissures within the Sangha as they are regarded, especially by young activist monks, as corrupt government stooges.

The regime has also continued to arrest monks believed to have participated in the Saffron Revolution or who have otherwise criticised
the government. The Thailand-based Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) estimates that 253 monks and an unknown number of nuns remain in prison. Thirty monks were arrested at the two-year anniversary as the regime sought to discourage potential demonstrations. The regime has also paid closer scrutiny to lay persons visiting monasteries to make offerings or pay respects to monks. Abbots of monasteries have been forced to sign letters affirming that they will not lead the laity in protests against the government or join political parties, and young monks suspected of inclinations to become politically active as chief donors to the Sangha, acting as chief donors to the Sangha, of activity inside and outside the country. The most significant of these organisations are the Sasana Moli and the All Burma Monks Alliance, which have developed strong international branch organisations. Unfettered by domestic media censorship, these Burmese monks’ organisations have given international voice to the religion’s legitimate claim against an oppressive anti-Buddhist regime, which has been impossible for the silenced Sangha inside the country.

Perhaps the most important contribution of these organisations has been to weave together multiple strands of discourse about political legitimacy: strands that the regime once successfully kept separate. A more unified struggle for political freedoms in Burma has emerged with a more collective public perception of political oppression and the diminished legitimacy of Burma’s rulers. A Buddhist, democratic as well as minorities-focused protest movement is finding its foundations in a single framework. Monks outside the country are speaking on behalf of democracy, in support of human rights in Burma, and in support of imprisoned monks as well as refugees.

The government has lately officially nullified the 1990 elections in which the National League for Democracy won 392 out of 495 parliamentary seats. The Constitution that was pushed through in the days following Cyclone Nargis remains contested. But the regime continues to use this Constitution as a means of entrenching their power by claiming 25 per cent of parliamentary seats for the military and banning Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners from participating in the upcoming elections.

These actions have been widely condemned by the international community. Only time will tell if the junta’s game of seeking legitimacy internally through ‘participation’ in religious affairs, and externally by enacting democratic elections, will keep them in charge.
From stir-fries to ham sandwiches

TIM SOUTPHOMMASANE

It is a cliché but one of the great rituals of growing up in a multicultural society is to sit alongside other children in school to compare lunches.

For much of my schooling I never got too much of a chance to make interesting comparisons. I never thought twice about tucking into the stir fried pork or chicken on rice that my mother or father would prepare for my lunch. After all, most of my classmates had something similar. Even at the school canteen, it was possible to order some fried rice—a choice that quickly became more popular than sausage rolls and meat pies.

I went to primary school in Canley Vale, one of Sydney’s outer southwest suburbs. The vast majority of families who sent their children to my school came from the old French Indochina. Many of my schoolmates were from Vietnam, though a good proportion of these Vietnamese were ethnic Chinese. There were also lots of Cambodians and Laotians. Of course, there were also Yugoslavs (as they were known then), Italians, Turks, Chileans and Argentineans. And even a handful of blue-eyed Anglos. But for the most part, my fellow students belonged to families from Southeast Asia. Their names were far more likely to be Phuong, Vong or Sothea—or for that matter, Dragan, Fatima or Enrique—than David or Corey or Sarah. And they didn’t have ham, cheese and tomato sandwiches for lunch.

This was the Sydney I grew up in during the 1980s. The critics of multiculturalism at the time would probably have called it something of a ghetto. Indeed, when neighbouring Cabramatta — Sydney’s ‘little Saigon’ — became the hub of heroin trade in the early 1990s, it triggered a brief crime panic across Sydney. There were echoes of old fears of the yellow peril. People feared ‘triads’ and ‘Asian gangs’ taking over the city’s streets. Fuzzy closed circuit camera footage of rampaging, long-fringed gangsters would be replayed on tabloid evening news programs. Working-class Anglo-Australians took flight from the suburbs around Cabramatta, though this would be accompanied by a steady and pronounced rise in local house prices.

Of course, southwest Sydney was never an Asian ghetto; at least, not in any meaningful sense of the word. Violent crime, though it was a problem during some of the 1990s, didn’t persist for long. Whether it has been because of entrepreneurial drive, a prioritisation of education within families, strong community support networks, or a combination of all these things, social mobility rather than social disadvantage has been the norm for Indochinese migrants.

Today, Cabramatta is a thriving commercial precinct. Visitors come from within and outside Sydney on weekends. There’s no better place to slurp on a pho, to sample Southeast Asian authenticity; one form of authenticity, anyway. One day a supposed ghetto, a tourist drawcard the next.

And to catch a train from Cabramatta these days into the city on a given weekday morning is to be surrounded by young professionals working in finance, accounting and IT. That, and university students buried in their textbooks, no doubt destined to join the same professional ranks in a few years’ time.

There is even a distinctive southwest Sydney accent that has developed during the last two decades. The English you overhear on the pavement on Cabramatta’s John Street, or on the carriages of city-bound trains on the south line, is more often
than not tinged with tonal Vietnamese or Chinese. The mark, you might say, that a minority has been successfully integrated into the nation.

Yet to declare a happy and triumphant ending here for the Indochinese-Australian story would be premature. For one thing, the spectre of racism remains. The resurgence of white Australian nationalism and jingoistic patriotism is cause for concern, though it is being resisted by Australians who detect in all the narcissistic flag-waving and sporting of Southern Cross tattoos a corruption of national symbols.

For another thing, Asian-Australians remain something of an exoticised species in the national imagination. The commodification of multicultural success – the fact that day trips to Cabramatta, for instance, are marketed as a ‘taste of Asia’ – should be regarded with some ambivalence. The underlying logic of the exercise, that diversity is a benefit only because it can be consumed, might do more to get in the way of regarding migrant Australians as fellow citizens. The exotic can only ever be marginal strangers.

This has been one of the problems with much of the support for multiculturalism to date: it has valued cultural diversity only superficially without understanding its expression as ultimately tied to citizenship. Yet multiculturalism, as it has been expressed in public policy, has always represented a means towards the end of full and equal citizenship for Australians regardless of background. It has never been about some ideal of cultural cornucopia.

The integration of Indochinese migrants into Australian life, while for the large part complete in the realms of market and consumption, remains...
rather incomplete in the public sphere. Very few from Indochinese backgrounds have successfully entered politics at anything higher than the local council level. There is the Cambodian-born Hong Lim, a Labor member of the Victorian lower house, but he is currently the only one. Indochinese participation in political party politics to date has been besmirched by allegations of ‘ethnic bosses’ engaging in sleazy ‘branch stacking’.

In the media and popular culture more broadly, those from Indochinese backgrounds remain largely invisible. While the streetscapes of Australian cities have been transformed by Asian immigration, there are few Southeast Asian faces to be seen on the beaches of Summer Bay or the cul-de-sac of Ramsey Street. For now, Asian faces remain largely quarantined on SBS. Those who are the ethnic trailblazers, such as the Vietnamese-born comedian Anh Do, wield a double-edged sword: they can make light of their ethnicity and difference, and justify it as a necessary pressure valve for race relations, but they can also risk being, well, ghettoised on TV.

Those first-generation and second-generation Australians from Indochinese backgrounds are for the most part unconcerned. The social politics of ethnicity and nation aren’t first-order priorities, certainly not for many who have left their homelands in large part to escape politics. In any case, integration takes time and sometimes we just don’t notice it. I suspect that in many school grounds today there are many Australian children of Indochinese background with names such as John or Sarah or, yes, Tim, opening their lunchboxes to find not a stir fry with fried rice, but a white-bread ham sandwich.

ANU College of Asia and the Pacific

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• Poverty and equality

Speakers include:
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The next step up for a Southeast Asian power

MAHANI ZAINAL ABIDIN AND STEVEN WONG

For all the hype about industrial development, technology and markets, there are not many countries in the world that have experienced rapid development on a sustained basis after the Second World War. Malaysia is one such exception. But now it has reached an inflection point where the country must step up to become an advanced economy with an inclusive society and a mature democracy.

When Malaysia gained independence its main assets were its rubber plantations and tin mines, and much was still owned by foreign companies. A large proportion of the population was engaged in agriculture and poverty was endemic. There was hardly any industry to speak of and those industries that did exist were small-scale and domestically oriented.

Making matters even more tenuous was the multi-racial population, with a large percentage of immigrants. Like elsewhere in Southeast Asia, but more so, ethnic Chinese dominated most aspects of commercial life and formed a powerful urban mercantilist class. Native Malays were still to be found on the land while Indians mainly worked the rubber estates. Out of this diverse ethnic milieu, there was a political accord to be crafted and a nation built. The accord produced government by a coalition of the three largest ethnic political parties. This grand compromise set the template of governance in Malaysia where the majority of political parties are ethnic-based.

But the forging of a critical nexus between political legitimacy and economic and social performance is one of the key reasons why Malaysia has largely managed to side-step the fractious ethnic infighting that has plagued many other countries. It was the promise of a better standard of living that enticed the Malays to share political power with the non-Malays, while it was the promise of non-Malays being able to accumulate wealth that spurred them to cooperate.

Ethnic and religious tensions may have been effectively managed – on occasion just barely – but they have not disappeared.

Fast-forward 53 years. Apart from three recessionary episodes in 1985, 1998 and 2009, the Malaysian rakyat (people) have seen significant improvements in their standard of living. Malaysia’s economy has now become more globally integrated and, as the 18th largest trading nation, it hosts a large stock of foreign direct investment and is a major exporter of electronic semiconductors and palm oil.

With a per capita income of $US6800, it is classified as a middle income country but one that is at the low end of the scale. Economic growth after the Asian crisis in 1998 has moderated; as it did in many other East Asian economies. Even in purchasing power parity terms, Malaysia’s standard of living is only comparable to that of Turkey or Ukraine, a big step from where it was but requiring an even bigger leap to make it to the middle rungs of advanced economies.

There have been dramatic social changes too. Absolute poverty has markedly declined from over 50 per cent of households to around 5 per cent. Of equally striking impact has been the effect of mass education. This has not come cheaply. Up to a fifth of annual budgets have consistently gone to the building of schools and universities. Investments in socio-economic infrastructure have also been a focal point. Malaysia boasts some of the best public facilities in Southeast Asia, something that first time visitors never fail to notice. And these are not confined only to major urban centres. The national preoccupation with development has meant that public amenities can be found in all but the most remote villages.

The satiation of basic needs has given rise to new and non-materialistic
FADING INFLUENCE

Mahathir's regional legacy

GREGORE LOPEZ

Southeast Asia has seen its fair share of authoritarian leaders. Malaysia’s Dr. Mahathir Mohamed is one who still endures, albeit now on the sidelines. Ascending to the premiership of Malaysia in July 1981, and ruling until his forced retirement in October 2003, he reigned in impressive fashion. Among the many titles that were bestowed on this poor boy from a Malaysian backwater were ‘respected Muslim,’ ‘Third World leader,’ and ‘spokesman for developing nations.’ Within the country, as overseas, he was both loathed and loved. In his quest to transform Malaysia into a ‘developed nation’ he used all possible means, both domestic and external, to achieve his grand vision. Seven years since his departure, what has been his legacy?

Mahathir gave Malaysia a new profile through his larger than life personality, ambition and action. He developed the role of ‘Third World leader’ when he took on Malaysia’s colonial masters through his ‘Buy British Last’ policy. He regularly attacked the West while encouraging developing nations to work together through his frameworks of ‘Asian Values,’ the ‘Look East Policy’ and ‘South-South Cooperation.’ He weighed in on international issues such as the global environment, Antarctica and even what he termed a ‘New World Order.’ He also stood up for the Islamic ‘Ummah’ by speaking out against its perceived opponents, and provided strong support for Palestinian and Bosnian Muslims in their struggles.

His actions in the region were more pragmatic. Mahathir—alongside other ASEAN leaders from Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand—saw ASEAN within the framework of regional security and as an expanding market for Malaysian goods and services. In ensuring regional security, Mahathir continued Malaysia’s longstanding hybrid form of neutrality.

Since independence Malaysia has relied on Britain, Australia and New Zealand to underwrite its security but has concurrently endorsed the view that ASEAN should be free of big power influence. Mahathir continued this awkward tradition. It has now been revealed that in 1984 Mahathir signed a secret defence agreement with the United States; an agreement which he deemed beneficial to Malaysia. It vastly expanded military cooperation between the two nations. This revelation contradicts the vehement public statements that Mahathir made about not indulging foreign, especially US, influence in Malaysia or the wider ASEAN region. This was classic Mahathirism: pragmatic to the point of hypocrisy.

To further strengthen ASEAN both in regional security and economic terms, Mahathir encouraged the consolidation and expansion of the organisation. He strongly supported the ASEAN-UN International
Conference on Cambodia that eventually led to a negotiated settlement between the warring sides. Mahathir also played a key role in promoting the membership of Burma through the much-maligned policy termed ‘constructive engagement’. During the Mahathir era, ASEAN eventually came to include all ten countries of the region.

With the end of the Cold War and the rise of China, Mahathir and ASEAN realised that a new platform was needed to ensure regional security and to contain China. Mahathir therefore took an active role in the shaping of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN’s post-Cold War regional security apparatus. The ARF brought together the regional powers and the United States in an effort to guarantee regional peace.

In expanding its markets and in response to the formation of the European Union (EU) and the North American Free Trade Association, Mahathir and ASEAN responded with another free trade agreement called the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement.

Notwithstanding these contributions, Mahathir’s legacy seems to be fading. This began with his treatment of Anwar Ibrahim, his able deputy whom he humiliated. Mahathir’s credibility as an Islamic leader was damaged forever with that action. Malaysia celebrated his resignation by giving his replacement, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the biggest-ever mandate for an incoming prime minister. Furthermore, since his departure, the effects of his authoritarian rule are increasingly felt. The use of democratic institutions to protect corrupt leaders and to attack the opposition, the unprecedented rise of religious bigotry, and the weakening of the country’s economic fundamentals all point back to Mahathir’s years in charge.

On the regional front, Mahathir tried his best to keep Australia and the US out of the region to satisfy his own prejudices. While the US was too powerful to be ignored, Mahathir relished vetoing Australia’s involvement in ASEAN-related forums. Since his departure, Australia has been granted its relevant memberships and Malaysia is now more closely aligned to both Australia and the US than ever before.

While Mahathir held sway over domestic and global politics for 22 years as a courageous Third World leader, his departure was welcomed, not only by Malaysians but also by Malaysia’s neighbours. Malaysians now have the task of cleaning up the messes he left behind.
In early 2010, ten Christian churches in Malaysia were firebombed, attacked or vandalised on account of a controversy over the use of the word ‘Allah’ by Malaysian Christians. A Catholic weekly, *The Catholic Herald*, had been ordered by the government in 2009 to cease publishing its Malay-language edition until the courts resolved the question of whether the word ‘Allah’ could mean the God of the Christian faith, rather than the God of Islam. Claims were made that such usage would confuse Muslims, who mainly spoke Malay.

On 31 December 2009, the Kuala Lumpur High Court ruled in favour of *The Herald*. The subsequent attacks on churches represented a violent rejection of the High Court ruling by radicalised sections of Malaysian society. ‘Allah’, they asserted in the language of Molotov cocktails, was only for Malays.

This semantic quibble can seem baffling to non-Malaysians, but it is wholly explicable within the context of Malaysian social dynamics. The trouble arises from the conflation of at least two factors: first, the troubling relationship that exists between ‘Malay’ and ‘Muslim’ in Malaysia, and second, the relationship that Malay-Muslims have with the rest of Malaysian society.

It should be made clear that there are at least two words for ‘God’ in Malay: ‘Allah’, and ‘Tuhan.’ The first is from Arabic: a Semitic word for...
the divine, combining the definite article al- (the one) with the root word -ilah (god). The second and probably older word in the region, ‘Tuhan,’ shares a common etymology with the Austronesian word ‘atua,’ or ‘te atua’ in Maori, meaning ‘god.’ The link isn’t surprising. Malay is a member of the Malayo-Polynesian language tree, and many other linguistic commonalities run throughout the region: Indonesian, Micronesian, Polynesian and Philippine languages are all relatively closely related.

Both words have been in use in Malay, more or less interchangeably, throughout its written history. Even on the Terengganu Inscription Stone, the earliest evidence of Islam on the Malay peninsula, which dates to around 1303 CE, the word ‘Allah’ appears three times, and the word ‘Tuhan’ twice. What has animated the controversy, however, is the claim by the ruling government that the word ‘Allah’ is something especially Islamic, and by extension, exclusively Malay. The trouble comes at ‘by extension.’

Under the Federal Constitution, a Malay is defined as a person who, firstly, is born to a Malaysian citizen, who professes to be Muslim, who speaks the Malay language, who adheres to Malay custom and, finally, is domiciled in Malaysia. This definition comes directly from the Land Reservation Act of 1913, which the British passed in an attempt to define the group of people for whom state protectionist policies were intended.

But over time the definition proved both politically expedient and psychologically central to Malay self-perception. The British gained much colonial mileage out of professing to be protecting ‘the Malays,’ and ‘the Malays’ came to see themselves as a coherent cultural entity. The result is that today this definition is no longer only politically instrumental; it has become true for many Malays. It is an authentic description of what their sense of identity rests on: geography, language, culture — and religion. The latter figures most importantly: Malays who convert from Islam are no longer considered constitutionally Malay; Malay Christians are unthinkable.

But why is Islam, more than the other four elements of the definition, such an important part of Malay identity? The answer here, I feel, is demographic, and one can see that by comparing Malaysia with Indonesia.

Visible ethnic minorities in Indonesia have never comprised a large part of the population; today they are often deeply assimilated. The Chinese population, at 3-5 per cent of the total, is relatively small. Indonesians, who speak a language similar to Malay, have never experienced anxieties over which ethnic or linguistic group is entitled to use the word ‘Allah.’ Indonesian Christians use it without a second thought.

In contrast, Malaysia is a much more heterogeneous society, with Malays making up around 60 per cent of the population, ethnic Chinese somewhere around 25-30 per cent and ethnic Indians, mostly Tamils but also some Punjabis, around 8 per cent. This has led to a certain amount of racial insecurity. The proximity of cultural difference has created incentives for Malays to differentiate themselves, and to cling tightly to those differences. And in Malaysia, of the five constitutional elements of ‘Malayness’ I listed above from the 1913 definition, only two remain which are not now widely shared by all citizens since independence in 1957: Malay ‘custom,’ and Islam.

Religion has therefore become a central marker of ethnic identity in Malaysia. And here is the nub of the problem. In the case of Islam, a religion that has historically spread with its carrier language, Arabic comes with the territory. It’s not so much that many Malays speak Arabic, but rather that any connection to the Arabic culture and language should be, in Malaysia, only effected through Islam — which is in turn almost exclusively Malay.

One sees this connection embedded in the Malay language, where words of Arabic origin often acquire an aura of intrinsic religiosity. The word ‘kitab,’ for example, may just refer to a normal ‘book’ in Arabic, but in Malay it refers specifically to religious books, while secular books are simply ‘buku,’ from English. Something similar is happening here with ‘Allah.’ It may ‘just’ mean ‘God’ in Arabic, but in Malaysia, amidst identity politics and
deep-rooted Malay anxieties, it is much more than a semantic quibble.

The claim that only Malay-Muslims are entitled to use the word ‘Allah’, and that everyone else must use ‘Tuhan’, certainly arises out of this ingrained defensiveness over what it is to be Malay.

The claim that ‘Allah’ is somehow especially Islamic is disproved at least by the fact that the word itself predates Islam. Any argument that it has become Islamic over time is furthermore disproved by the fact that it remains in use today by Arab Christians and Indonesian Catholics. The dogged adherence to this claim by a small number of firebomb-wielding extremists is only explicable when we understand how sensitively most Malays are invested in themselves as Muslims, in distinction to the other ethnic groups and religions of Malaysia.

One might observe that if Malays were really interested in being more ‘Malay’, they should in fact use the word ‘Tuhan’, which is much more ‘Malay’ for having deeper regional roots, than ‘Allah’, which is, after all, an imported name for an imported God.

VU MINH KHUONG

Since unprecedented economic reforms began in 1986, Vietnam has transformed itself from a country on the verge of economic collapse and isolation into one of the most open and fastest-growing economies in the world. Enabling the country’s rapid GDP growth, averaging 7.5 per cent between 1990 and 2008, is its robust integration into the world economy, with an average trade growth rate exceeding 20 per cent over the same period. In 2008, Vietnam was more integrated than most its Asian peers in both trade and FDI measures.

Vietnam’s impressive economic performance has been driven by its three major strengths. The first is related to the country’s geographic, strategic, and demographic advantages. The country is situated in the heart of Asia and borders China, a booming economic giant. The distance from Hanoi to any other major city in Asia, including Hong Kong, Shanghai, Beijing, Seoul, Tokyo, Singapore, and New Delhi, is but a two- to six-hour flight. And with over 3000 kilometres of coastline, this S-shaped country offers excellent conditions for all parts of the country to participate in global trade. Vietnam is the world’s 13th most populous country and enjoys a young population, which implies the country has both a large market and an energetic labour force.

The country’s second major strength is its political stability. On the World Bank’s indicator of ‘political stability’, Vietnam ranks well above most of its Asian peers, including China, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines.

The country’s third major strength lies in its human capital. The Vietnamese people are known by many for their eagerness to improve their lives through hard work, for their commitment to education, to entrepreneurship, and for their willingness to seize emerging opportunities. Foreign investors have often praised Vietnamese workers for being quick-learning and industrious. As evidence, Vietnam has overtaken most developing Asian countries, including China, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines, with respect to internet penetration and number of students studying in the United States per 100,000 population.

Does Vietnam’s impressive past economic performance coupled with its considerable strengths suggest that it has a bright future? A ‘yes’ answer depends on the national leadership’s vision, determination, and practical approach in overcoming the three fundamental weaknesses it is facing.

First, although Vietnam has reaped immense benefits in shifting from a command to a market economy, it has not entirely committed to unleashing the full impact of market forces. Unjustified subsidies provided to state-owned enterprises, large investments poured into commercially unviable industrial projects, ineffective support for private sector development, and the persistence of ‘market control’...
attitudes (with effects across prices, exchange rates and interest rates) have caused severe market distortions and investment inefficiencies. In fact, the economy is beset by low capital investment efficiency, evidenced by a high incremental capital output ratio relative to its Asian peers. For Vietnam, it takes more capital investment per percentage point growth in GDP than most other Asian countries. The country’s rapid growth has been driven more by labour reallocation and expansion on a low value added structure than by within-sector productivity growth and the effort to move up the technological ladder.

Second, while Vietnam has enjoyed rapid economic growth, it seems to have paid inadequate efforts to good governance. The poor quality of public policy in the country — especially with regards to urban planning and management, corruption controls and environmental protection — is one of society’s most serious concerns. The rapid expansion of government and party-sector employment may also have been a factor that has deterred improvements to institutional competence and effectiveness. The productivity of the sectors associated with the government, the party, and its affiliated organisations, have declined substantially over time.

Vietnam’s third weakness is its heavy dependence on external resources. As a percentage of GDP, foreign aid and workers’ remittances are much higher for Vietnam than for its Asian peers. With sizeable sources of foreign aid, the country can afford to pay less attention to raising the efficiency and strategic effectiveness of large projects. With large and increasing flows of workers’ remittances, the country can enjoy rapid increases in consumption and impressive reductions in poverty without the pressing urgency for efforts to make people more productive and frugal. As a result, the overall cost of Vietnam’s heavy dependence on external resources lies rather in neglecting to upgrade and to leverage the strength of its human capital: the most powerful engine of a country’s growth and critical in moves towards a high performance economy.

Vietnam is at a pivotal juncture in its development journey. Making decisive and urgent efforts to address the country’s weaknesses by upholding free market principles, building good governance, and leveraging human capital will shift the country toward a better strategic position on its path to prosperity. Neglecting these efforts, due to complacency or a fear of change, could cost the country and its future dearly. For Vietnam, the fact is that today determines tomorrow. This is not only a time-tested truth; it is a national imperative. The situation has become so urgent and so strategically important that if the country is to avoid the middle-income trap, it will require inspired national leadership and decisive action.
The perks of office are vast in the Philippines, where President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo has seen her declared personal net worth grow from $US1.5 million in 2001 to $US3.2 million in 2008. This is a yearly increase of almost $US250,000: not bad for someone with a monthly salary of just $US1000. So it is little wonder politicians are prepared to go to extreme lengths to ensure that they are the next in line to serve the nation.

Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, for example, won office in 2004 amid widespread allegations that she conspired with the Electoral Commissioner, Virgilio Garcilliano, to tamper with results from Mindanao to ensure victory over action star Ferdinand Poe Jr. This has since become known as the ‘Hello Garci’ scandal. In the 2007 Senatorial race the result of an entire municipality’s vote temporarily vanished at the hands of a provincial electoral officer. When the ballots eventually resurfaced they reflected a statistically improbable result: 12 - 0 in favour of pro-administration candidates.

In light of such irregularities, the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) has determined to automate the coming elections, scheduled for 10 May 2010. COMELEC has taken delivery of 82,200 Precinct Count Optical Scanners (PCOS) and is confident the machines will not only deliver a rapid result following the election, but also make vote-rigging a thing of the past. Critics see the potential for the machines to be manipulated, where cheating could become just as fast as the count – and harder to detect.

Ultimately any benefits obtained through changing the electoral process in this way must be weighed against key risks: will automated voting deliver a credible outcome? How will those intent on manipulating the result adapt to the new electoral process? Could automated voting result in an unacceptable level of electoral violence?

An electoral process is only as strong as the trust electors place in it. Elsewhere in the world the fallibility of computers is leading to a lack of trust in automated electoral processes. Voting machines are vulnerable to tampering at many stages in their life-cycle. While security measures can be implemented to manage these risks, increased complexity can undermine credibility if electors do not understand how the integrity of their vote is protected.

While the Philippines has sought to address some of these concerns by opting for optical scanning machines, where voters feed a paper ballot into a machine to be instantly tallied, electors will not be able to verify how their vote has been recorded by the PCOS machine. Further, while a paper trail of voter intentions will exist, it remains unclear how a discrepancy between precinct and aggregated results will be resolved. It is hard to believe that after decades of experience with
electoral fraud, Filipino electors will immediately trust automation.

Another key issue for a credible result is the need for electoral monitoring and certification by trusted civil society groups. With automation comes the need for more technical methods of electoral monitoring, such as testing of PCOS machines and review of the source code. So far, civil society groups have not been able to certify the integrity of the proposed hardware and software, while the process for auditing post-ballot results remains unclear. There is concern over the lack of transparency offered by COMELEC and the PCOS machine manufacturer, Smartmatic.

Of even greater concern is that for the first time since spearheading electoral monitoring in the Marcos years, The National Citizens’ Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL), which is the largest and most influential electoral watchdog, has been denied accreditation by COMELEC—meaning they will be unable to conduct machine audits or a parallel vote count. At a time of such dramatic change in the electoral process, it is suspicious that this organisation will not participate in monitoring the ballot. Without the credibility of thorough civil society participation, it is unlikely automated voting will produce an uncontested outcome.

The next key risk is how political operators will adapt to the new electoral framework. The general consensus on automated voting is that while it resolves some concerns over electoral fraud at the ballot box, it creates new concerns in other parts of the system—particularly surrounding the transmission and aggregation of votes. The results of individual precinct PCOS machines will be sealed prior to transmission with a digital signature, issued only to the Board of Election Inspectors. However, the digital signatures will be generated and issued by Smartmatic, meaning that, in theory, electronic precinct tallies could be unlocked, tampered with, and resealed, before being sent on for aggregation.

The degree of access possessed by the system administrator is another major threat to the integrity of the election. The so-called ‘God’ power of the administrator to edit results presents an unprecedented opportunity for widespread electoral fraud at the touch of a button. It is still unclear exactly how much access any system administrator will possess and what checks and balances are in place to prevent abuse of this power.

What is clear is that for those who would seek to manipulate the results, systemic access points remain. And so long as that is the case, it seems unlikely that cheating will be totally eradicated, so much as moved to somewhere else in the electoral process. Automated voting could well bring about the centralisation of electoral tampering where the power of local politicians to sway an individual electoral race is merely transferred to whoever wields influence over COMELEC and Smartmatic.

The automation process may also lead to greater electoral violence. With obvious difficulties around stealing an election at the ballot box, a change of tactics may be required. In the words of Benito Lim, a political scientist at Ateneo de Manila University: ‘The automation process has changed the rules of the game, and politicians who fear they can no longer manipulate poll results are more tempted to eliminate each other.’ Indeed the pre-election death toll—including the massacre of over 40 civilians rival to the Ampatuan political clan in Maguindanao province late in 2009—is already much higher than in previous elections.

Voter intimidation at the local level is also likely to increase as politicians shift their efforts to changing electors’ votes before they are cast. Again, without the means to alter the ballot itself, local politicians are likely to turn to scare tactics to ensure victory—albeit in a more procedurally clean vote. Perversely, voter intimidation will actually become easier under the automated voting system, as each PCOS machine will be manned by an official tasked with helping voters to insert their ballot correctly, undermining rights to complete secrecy.

Lastly, there is a risk of greater post-election violence if voters feel they have been disenfranchised. It is currently expected that thousands of uneducated voters may be unable to vote because they cannot understand the automated voting system. Others are expected to lose their voice due to the high margin of error of the PCOS machines, which can fail to read between five and fifteen per cent of votes. Without clearly defined mechanisms for independent auditing and the resolution of irregularities in the vote, electors may have no alternative to violence should they suspect widespread fraud or disenfranchisement.

There can be no doubt that automated voting systems deliver both real benefits and real risks in determining outcomes. While in some countries this trade-off might be acceptable, in the Philippines, where there is little trust in the government or democratic institutions, automated voting is likely to create more doubt than it resolves.