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Political Transitions and Regional Security in Southeast Asia

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Introduction

The various general elections recently held in Southeast Asia – Indonesia, Malaysia, and Philippines – took place against a backdrop of significant political transitions that have salient implications for the politics and security of states in the region. These political transitions, however, began even before the holding of these elections and were seen in the elections in Thailand and Singapore three years earlier. Significant developments within these states had brought to the fore new political, economic and social challenges amid emerging and changing dynamics in state-society relationships. They arose in a regional environment of widening economic and social inequities, unresolved political conflicts, growing ethnic tensions, as well as weak institutions.

There are also security challenges that afflict the region, ranging from traditional to non-traditional security concerns which cut across national boundaries. These include, among others, the problems of illegal migration, transnational crimes, environmental degradation, infectious diseases and terrorism. The challenges of the politics of transitions and their implications on domestic stability and regional security are key issues that were examined in a recent forum in Singapore.

The Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS) convened a *Roundtable on Political Transitions and Regional Security in Southeast Asia* on 2 September 2004 to identify and analyse what these challenges are and derive insights on the nature of these political transitions taking place in the region. The Roundtable featured political and security experts from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand(*) who provided country perspectives on the subject.

Summary of Discussions:

The following are the themes and highlights of the discussion:

- *Sifting the 'new' developments from the 'old' in these political transitions*

In Indonesia, the transition brought a myriad mix of actors entering politics, reflected in the increase of political parties from 5 during the Suharto era to 342 in the last elections—leading

one to think that ‘political market forces’ would ultimately determine who would survive. The big jump in political parties was also accompanied by significant reforms in electoral procedures that allowed among others, for the President to be directly elected by the people and for voters to choose between parties and individual candidates. The Indonesian transition also involved the establishment of a unicameral legislature with the abolishing of the People’s Consultative Assembly (MPR) and the creation of an advisory council of regional representatives (DPD).

This change gave more power to the parliament and curtailed the powers of the executive. The diffusion of power is seen in the increasing influence of the media and civil society in the affairs of the state; while a political party machinery remained a formidable asset, it no longer became the main determinant for winning elections. To many, the Indonesian public had already become more autonomous and discerning in whom they wished to support politically. Despite these significant developments, political continuities remained in three important areas: the traditional *aliran* was still mostly intact; political parties were still powerful and the family networks of elites continued to wield influence in Indonesian politics.

In the Philippines, the recent elections saw a significant increase in the number of registered voters, particularly since overseas Filipinos were allowed to cast their votes for the first time. The transition also brought some changes in the country’s political system, which now allows representation of the marginalized and underprivileged groups through the introduction of a party list system. This has opened up 44 seats of the 250-strong House of Representatives to this segment of Filipino society. Moreover, the establishment of various institutions has helped to govern the election systems. Hence besides the Commission on Elections, the Commission on Audit and the civil society watchdog—National Citizens Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) became involved in the monitoring of election results.

The country’s strong civil society movements however had not drastically altered the political environment that is still very much dominated by political dynasties. The lack of momentum for more meaningful political reforms in spite of the establishment of new institutions, was lamentable given that the Philippine Congress was still very much the exclusive zone of the Filipino elites. As a consequence, many Filipinos remain alienated and dissatisfied with the new government, which while appearing to be more populist, was still perceived as largely ineffective.

Meanwhile, in Malaysia and in Singapore, the political transitions presented more continuity than change. This common feature was also meant to assure the citizens of these two states as well as the foreign investors about continued political stability and consistency in policies. The newly installed prime ministers of both countries also sought to consolidate support and carve out a new mandate for themselves, after coming out of the shadows of long-serving political leaders. For Malaysia’s Abdullah Badawi, a more consensual and softer political style was stressed; Singapore’s Lee Hsien Loong emphasized his goal of moving Singaporeans beyond their preoccupation with economic matters to more human and holistic concerns.

Nonetheless, the new administrations in both countries find themselves having to confront and calibrate issues of democratic consolidation. In the case of the Badawi administration, it has projected an image of refraining from micro-managing the country and returning more power to Malaysians. Lee, on the other hand, has introduced more opening of public discourse in the city-state.

As for the current transitions in Thailand, the gubernatorial elections in Bangkok could be seen as a bell-wether for significant changes to come in the Thaksin-led government. The upset win of the opposition Democratic candidate against the dominant Thai Rak Thai candidates reflected a clear protest vote against the Thaksin administration that has been perceived by the country's middle-class as becoming too powerful and arrogant. And, despite the impressive record of four years of consistent economic growth, concern about the viability of the high-cost populist policies and fears about creeping authoritarianism, as well as the security concerns in Southern Thailand have led to the ebbing of support for Thaksin.

Whether or not the Bangkok elections signaled the possible 'de-Thaksinisation' of Thai politics still remains to be seen given Thaksin's pervasive control over business, media, politics and the military. In the aftermath of the Bangkok electoral results, there's a strong likelihood that Thaksin might call for a snap election before the end of 2004 to arrest the slide in his and his party's popularity.

- *Prospects for Democratic Consolidation*

For a country that has undergone a dramatic transition from a 33-year Suharto military-dominated regime, the developments in the Indonesian politics present a mixed picture of democratic consolidation. The new configurations in power distribution from the military to civilians, the democratic reforms currently undertaken and the creation of new political institutions, as well as the emergence of a vibrant civil society paint a transitioning democratic state that is still very much fraught with risks as old players make way for new political actors. Nevertheless optimism remains especially in the light of the recently held elections where there was a marked absence of election-related violence.

In the Philippines, despite its history of 'people-power' since the fall of the Marcos regime in 1986, democratic consolidation remains an elusive goal given the kind of political and security problems plaguing the country. Until the necessary institutional reforms are put in place to create a stable environment, doubts will remain as to the efficacy of a Philippine-type democracy.

As for Thailand, concerns about the sliding-back of democratic transitions to authoritarianism persist in spite of the new developments in Bangkok. Nevertheless, the Bangkok elections present a good example of citizens rejecting the perceived return of an autocratic leader after the transition to democratic rule has taken place.

Malaysia and Singapore have set good examples of good governance and adherence to the rule of law. A major challenge for these countries however is to respond to the new demands brought on by globalisation. One of these challenges is the creation of a new economy that would require and value those with unconventional ideas and enquiring minds. In this regard, economics might ultimately force political change—the shape of which remains uncertain.

- *Impact on Regional Security*

The transitions taking place in these countries have stressed the primacy of domestic concerns over regional issues. These could have bring about both positive and negative outcomes. Indonesia's instability brought on by a weak government had produced insecurity

in the region, especially against the increase of terrorist-related incidents in Southeast Asia. It is hoped that the 2004 presidential election could usher in a more stable leadership that could work with the various forces in the country to deal with security and foreign policy issues.

The 'unilateralist' tendency of some leaders to ignore regional initiatives could fracture ASEAN solidarity. For instance, there's been some concern that Thaksin's policy on pushing for Asian Cooperation Dialogue could weaken ASEAN's position. There's been concern also that committing troops to Iraq had exacerbated the terrorism threats in the region.

However, new leaders can bring positive changes in bilateral relations. Malaysia-Singapore relations, for example, have taken a positive turn since Abdullah Badawi and Lee Hsien Loong took over. The strengthening of economic and political relations between the two countries could provide a strong core for ASEAN in the midst of concerns that the preoccupation of domestic affairs would set the regional grouping adrift.

Political transitions would also bring changes to intra-regional relations. To be sure, elitist politics and shuttle diplomacy are on the decline as public diplomacy takes precedence in countries like Indonesia and the Philippines. Therefore, significant changes in the way politics and security are handled in the region are inevitable given the entry of new political actors in the scene. Given the unpredictability of political changes to come, it is all the more imperative for political elites in the region to build a network of relations with NGOs, the media and other political actors to manage the rapid changes ahead.

* The participants in the Roundtable were: Dr Rizal Sukma(Indonesia); Dr Jorge Tigno(Philippines); Mr Kavi Chongkittavorn(Thailand) and Mr Karim Raslan(Malaysia).

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